

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Presentation of the Lord • February 2, 2020

Malachi 3:1-4 • Psalm 84 • Hebrews 2:14-18 • Luke 2:22-40

Today's gospel reading is a study in contrasts. On the one hand, we have Jesus, a child about forty days old. Forty days was the minimum amount of time Mary had to wait before going in the temple after giving birth.¹ So before heading home to Nazareth, there is a stop in Jerusalem with this extremely young child.

And on the other hand, we have Simeon and Anna, both of whom are elders in their community. First, we meet Simeon. As soon as Mary and Joseph enter the temple, Simeon is there to meet them. Simeon was an old man who was waiting for what Luke calls the "consolation of Israel." The consolation of Israel means Israel's redemption. Because Simeon and his contemporaries, Joseph, Mary, Jesus, and all the disciples, lived under the narcissistic tyranny of Herod. Herod who ruled by economic exploitation, militaristic fear, and indifference toward those most in need.

But Simeon had been told that it wouldn't always be this way. God told him that someday Israel would be redeemed and that things will be different. And more than that, Luke says, God promised Simeon that he would not die before he saw God's redemption coming into the world. And so Simeon went to the temple every day in hopeful expectation.

That hopeful expectation would have put Simeon out of step with many of his neighbors. Because the easier thing to do is accommodate Herod. *Maybe Herod has some good ideas. You put up with the bad to get the good.* Or just give into outright resignation. *Yea, Herod's bad. But what are you going to do?*

Simeon resists both of those impulses. Simeon holds out that God's intention for the people is not just getting used to Herod but actively expecting, hoping for, and even demanding something better. So Simeon has been camped out in the temple waiting for the one who will redeem Israel. Because when the child comes into the Temple, Simeon wants to be the first to see.

Second, we meet Anna. Like Simeon, she is also elderly. Eighty-four to be exact. And she is in the temple for a slightly different reason. Likely because it was safe, and people tended to be generous when they went to the temple. Her husband died many decades ago, seven years into her marriage. Normally a widow would be taken into her son's house, but if you didn't have a son, you were probably on your own. So Anna didn't just visit the Temple. She practically lived there. Luke says that she never left it. Because it was safe. It was a kind of sanctuary. Just like Simeon, Anna waits in the Temple day after day waiting for something to change.

So it's no surprise to us that when the infant Jesus shows up, Simeon and Anna are both overjoyed. Simeon grabs Jesus from Mary's arms, which Mary must have found this impossibly annoying, and starts singing God's praises. Likewise, Anna praises God and then goes around telling everyone in the temple about this child she met. And it's possible to just read the story as a straight-up major-key Jesus-is-here isn't-this-great moment.

But there's something that makes their celebrations a little bit strange and much more profound. Simeon alludes to it when he says that God is dismissing him in peace. In other words, Simeon feels like now that he's seen this child, he can die. And that's exactly the point. Neither Simeon nor Anna will see the redemption that this child heralds. By the time Jesus is baptized by John, by the time Jesus feeds five thousand, by the time Jesus is crucified and rises again, Simeon and Anna will both be dead. Simeon and Anna celebrate the arrival of God's redemption, but the truth is neither of them will live to see it. Jesus is not going to make either of their lives better. Simeon will spend the rest of his days living under the same oppressive rule of Herod. And Anna will spend the rest of her life in the temple depending on the whims of other people's generosity. So why do they celebrate the way they do? This child will not change their lives in any meaningful way. Why do they do that?

Because they remember that it's all about the promise. Because only the promise creates something new. Only the promise creates something you can trust. Herod can't do that. Herod deals in executive fiat. No sooner does Herod speak a word than his cronies make it happen. Herod maintains control over people like Simeon not by lifting them up or improving their lives but by gaslighting them. And the system Anna's been failed by isn't

¹ William Loader, *Making Sense of Sex: Attitudes Towards Sexuality in Early Jewish and Christian Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 75.

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trustworthy either. Because at some point you run out of options. The safety net turns out to be a safety thread. And when it inevitably breaks, you end up in the temple fasting all day, whether you want to be fasting or not.

In a world that says there's not enough to go around, God's promise says that there is enough for all. In a world that is closing itself off, running out of options, God's promise creates a new reality for them to depend on. And that promise moves Anna and Simeon to a peculiar kind of celebration. Because they're not celebrating how this child will change their lives. They're celebrating how this child will change the lives of others.

This is a strange kind of celebration because so often our default setting is to view things in terms of us. To think that things become real and urgent insofar as they affect us. But when we view the world that way, when we mistake the immediacy of our own experience for its importance, we turn life into a zero-sum game. We act as if there is a finite amount of goodness in the world, and if someone is getting more, I must be getting less. This is so engrained in us that we don't even notice it anymore. The other day I was watching CNBC at the gym, and they have this fancy graphic that swipes right before they go to commercial. And the tag line is *GET YOURS*. The obvious subtext is *GET YOURS OR SOMEONE ELSE WHO DOESN'T DESERVE IT WILL TAKE IT*.

That's the way Herod thinks. Herod thinks that if someone below me gets any more agency over their lives, I must be losing power. That's the way the system that failed Anna was built on. People are a burden, so just pass them off to someone else. And it would be easy to imagine Simeon and Anna responding the same way. *I've been in the temple for God knows how long, and I don't get to see this redemption? What's in it for me?*

But what does God's promise do for Simeon and Anna? It breaks them out of that spiral. And when they see the promise of redemption coming into their lives, they celebrate. Because they trust that there's enough grace for everyone. The fact that they won't live to see this redemption in its entirety doesn't dampen their spirits. In fact, it does the exact opposite. They see that when more people are included in God's redemption, it doesn't cheapen it. It makes it stronger. It makes it better. And someone else's good fortune isn't necessarily to their detriment. In fact, it's the exact opposite.

Look at what Simeon says about Jesus. He calls Jesus a "glory to your people Israel." That makes sense. But then he calls him "a light of revelation to the Gentiles." If you have a zero-sum view of the world, if you think like Herod, you say, "Why do we have to get Gentiles involved in this? The Gentiles haven't been spending every day in the temple. The Gentiles don't even know what a messiah is. A messiah who is for everybody is a messiah who is for nobody." But that's not what Simeon says. Simeon says, "My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples." The fact that this messiah is for the Gentiles doesn't mean it's worth any less to Simeon. Just the opposite. It means it's worth more than he could have ever imagined.

God's promise to Simeon and Anna breaks them out of that zero-sum view of the world and leads them into the highest form of joy. The joy we feel when we experience the good fortune of others as if it were our own. And when we meet Jesus at table this day in this meal, God's promise does the same thing.

The invitation to that meal is always open. Because the meal shows forth a new way of life. A way of life that resists the endlessly competitive, zero sum, *GET YOURS* ways of the world. A meal where there is always enough. A meal where unexpected guests make the celebration even richer. A meal where we celebrate the redemption of others as if it were our own. Come, take, eat. And "see the salvation that God is preparing in the presence of all peoples."

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