

Isaiah 61: 10 – 62: 3; Gal. 4: 4-7; Luke 2: 22-40
Olivet Church, December 31, 2017

Revealing our Inner Thoughts

A number of years ago David Storch, a school music teacher, checked out a script of Handel's Messiah from the Brooklyn Public Library. Due to an error by a clerk, the book loan was not recorded. When others came looking to check out a copy of the script, they could not find it. A library-wide search ensued, but to no avail. Two weeks later David Storch returned to the library and set the Messiah down on the circulation desk. The librarian looked at it and joyfully said for all to hear, "Oh, the Messiah has come back!" Every head in the library turned to look. But as the New York Times reported, "In a few minutes, everyone had gone back to what they were doing."

A couple of days ago many heads turned to look, ears pricked up to listen, people showed up for worship to help proclaim the news, "joy to the world, the Lord is come." But even as we continue in our celebration of Christmas with 5 days yet to go, have we simply gone back to what we were doing before hearing the angels' song and the church's proclamation of this good news?

We just spent the last four Advent Sundays reflecting on "waiting" as people of faith. The waiting of the people of Israel for God's saving intervention in this world. The waiting as people of hope for Christ's return and the complete undoing and ending of evil, sin, suffering, injustice, violence, and death. The waiting as people of joy to celebrate the birth of Jesus with carols, gift-giving, Christmas feasts, candlelight services, and other rituals. Yet here we are again, in the Christmas season now, confronted with a story about two people who are waiting: Simeon and Anna. Simeon and Anna faithfully waited, and they were blessed by the Spirit of God with the prompting and the perspective to see God's salvation revealed. And yet they are in the waning years of their lives, and the salvation they see is a newborn baby whose ministry would not take shape for another 30 years. Yet in their seeing amidst their faithful and hope-filled waiting, they are granted the gift of peace through faith in things seen as well as unseen, embraced and held as well as hoped for.

You may remember the story of the people of Israel failing in their wait for Moses to come down from Mount Sinai. In their need and desire for a tangible source of comfort and hope they created a golden calf to worship. Those weary of waiting on a God who does not come are tempted to lower their eyes from the horizon, and fold their hands in prayer to more concrete gods to provide purpose, comfort and peace.

Simeon and Anna symbolize in Luke's gospel those who wait without turning to false gods; those who recognize, receive, believe, and follow Jesus as the true source of love, life, and salvation. Simeon is an older man with not much life left to live. He will not be seduced by the promises of self-improvement resolutions, health and wealth gospels, self-security schemes, and the elixirs of modern medicine to save him from aging, illness, and finally death. And Anna, as an older woman and widow, would have been destitute; the equivalent of a homeless bag lady in our day. She will not to be seduced by the promises of politicians, pay-day lenders, and opioid pushers. They are awaiting true consolation, comfort, and peace in God and God's salvation.

But they are not waiting passively as if there is nothing of value and importance to be doing while awaiting that redemption. Waiting for God is not like sitting in a darkened theater idly waiting for the movie to begin. Jesuit priest William Lynch writes that there are two kinds of waiting. One kind waits because there is nothing else to do. The other kind is born of hope. Lynch writes that “the decision to engage in this hopeful kind of waiting is one of the great human acts. It includes the acceptance of darkness, sometimes its defiance. It induces the enlarging of one’s perspective beyond the present moment and circumstances. And it chooses to wait in a way that gives the future the chance to emerge.” I love that notion; “waiting in a way that gives the future the chance to emerge.”

At the height of the civil rights movement in this country a group of white ministers in Alabama issued a public statement urging Dr. Martin Luther King to be more patient in his quest for justice and struggle for civil rights. In his famous response, “letter from a Birmingham jail,” Dr. King addressed the misunderstanding that time cures all ills. Time, he argued, could be used for good or for evil. Human progress, he said, is not inevitable, but rather, “comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be coworkers with God, and without this work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right.”

Simeon and Anna were waiting for God to come, but they were not passive. Simeon was full of devotion and did what was just. Anna kept the lights burning at the Temple with her ceaseless worship. They defied the darkness, serving and waiting on the God of light and love. While they waited, they worked and worshipped, performed acts of justice and prayer. And Luke tells us God came to them. Surely they were not expecting God’s advent in a fragile baby carried by two young parents, eager to obey the ritual laws for purification and redemption with their first born; who were too poor to afford the sacrifice of a lamb and brought with them instead the acceptable substitute, a pair of birds.

It’s not easy waiting for God. And the hardest part, is recognizing and accepting God when God comes. Preacher Tom Long writes, “We pray for God to come and bless our church with financial resources, volunteers, and leaders for our ministry; and God comes bringing not more help but a new and demanding mission. We pray for God to give us inner peace, and God comes and opens our eyes and hearts to pain and suffering in the world. We pray for God to come and heal a loved one, and God comes to us at the graveside saying, ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life.’ We pray for God to come and console God’s people, and in the front door walk two new and uncertain parents carrying a pair of birds, and a baby who will die on a cross.”

In Giotto’s fresco painting of Jesus’ presentation in the temple, the infant Jesus, far from resting contentedly in the arms of Simeon, is responding as any baby would when held by an eccentric stranger. His eyes seem fixed in frozen alarm on Simeon, and he is reaching out desperately for his mother, Mary. But Giotto knows the deeper truth of this moment; for as Jesus reaches toward Mary, we observe that he is suspended above the temple altar. While this day the poor Galilean couple will offer two birds as a sacrifice, this child will ultimately offer his very life for the redemption of humankind.

Which is harder, waiting for something we have not seen yet? Or waiting for something we have already seen and known? It may be harder waiting for the fullness of something we have already had a taste and an experience of, for we wait for it with greater longing. And yet it may be easier, for we have the assurance that we do not wait in vain. God comes among us, as God did to the people of Israel, to Anna and Simeon, to the world long ago, violating our expectations even while meeting our deepest needs and longings. Until God comes again to fulfill all that has begun and been promised in Christ, like Anna and Simeon, we do what we can to enable the future to emerge, as we wait. And like them we have been blessed with God's very Spirit. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."