

“Keep Celebrating Christmas”

It's sort of funny the way the world celebrates Christmas. Perhaps you recall months ago noticing how people rush into Christmas. Even before the Halloween candy has been eaten, Christmas displays seem to be popping up in stores. While some hold out until at least after Thanksgiving, from that moment on, it's Christmastime for society, or at least it is some sort of holiday season and a time for celebrating. But have you also noticed that once the day is over, once December 25 comes to an end, the world rushes just as quickly past Christmas? The radio stations switch back to regular programming, the lights start to get turned off and taken down, along with trees and decorations. The stores discount their Christmas items and start turning their attention to the next big sale. The world rushes into Christmas and then rushes out of it again.

The Church tries to do things differently. For a full season of Advent, the Church waits and prepares. It reserves and holds back its biggest celebrations. This year, with Christmas Eve falling as it did on a Sunday, we even had Advent worship services on the very same day when we would later celebrate Christmas Eve! The Church takes its time getting to Christmas. And then when Christmas comes, it doesn't rush right past. No, it stops and savors. It revels in Christmas. Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Sundays after Christmas. Even Epiphany, which we will celebrate in another week, is like a second Christmas for the Church as it sees a little child as the world's Savior.

So today, whether or not you've put away your Christmas decorations, whether or not you are still celebrating with Christmas gatherings and gifts, I would like to encourage you to keep celebrating Christmas. Keep celebrating what you know about the true meaning and the real reason for the holiday. Be like the people we meet in our lesson from Luke's Gospel today, Simeon and Anna.

Our Gospel for this First Sunday after Christmas tells us about events that took place 40 days after Jesus was born. His earthly parents had already had him circumcised according to the requirements of the law. At forty days after the birth of a son, the Israelite mother was instructed to visit the Temple to offer a sacrifice of purification. The firstborn son was also to be consecrated to the Lord. These were the matters that brought the family to the Temple that day.

While they were there, they met two unique individuals. Both were believers who were eagerly awaiting the Savior, waiting for God to keep the promises he had made.

Simeon we meet first. God had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. And God kept that promise to him. We're not told how old Simeon was at that time, though many have gotten the impression that he was quite old. What we are told is that the Holy Spirit made sure that he was in the Temple on that very day, the day that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus there. It was not by chance that Simeon saw the family. He then took Jesus in his arms and sang a song of praise. We've regularly repeated Simeon's song of praise in our worship services, both after Holy Communion and also at the end of many of our evening services.

Simeon not only praised and thanked God for allowing him to see the Savior as he had promised, but also sang about who that special boy was, the Promised one who would reveal God to Jew and Gentile alike and would bring them salvation. Mary and Joseph marveled at what Simeon said. And then he went on to say even more. He spoke about how Jesus would cause the rising and the falling of many and would also cause a piercing of Mary's soul as well.

Luke wraps up the visit with Simeon and immediately introduces another visit. The visitor was Anna, who is called a prophet. Her exact age is known. She was eighty-four. She had been a widow for some time and was found constantly in the Temple. She came up to the family, gave thanks to God, and – though we don't know her exact words – **“spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”**

Obviously Simeon and Anna have much in common with each other. They were both eagerly waiting and anticipating the One whom God had promised to send. They were both in the Temple on that special

day, and they both met a very special child who was just a little over a month old at the time. They both spoke their praises to God and shared with others the good news about this child. They both understood the significance of Christmas.

What they saw with their own eyes, we see only by faith. Just as we did not visit his manger in person with the shepherds of Bethlehem, neither have we seen him in the Temple as a baby like Simeon and Anna did. But their testimony about Jesus stills rings out for us. We are still encouraged by their examples to keep celebrating Christmas.

This activity in the Temple on that day reminds us of some very important truths. Jesus' coming into the world had been predicted and promised. There were people waiting, eagerly and even anxiously waiting for that promise to be fulfilled. Certain people like Simeon had unique promises and assurances, but God did not hide his promises from anyone.

Of course, not everyone reacted to those promises in the same way. While Simeon and Anna were waiting eagerly for the Savior to come, how many others were in the Temple that day? How many of them were just as eagerly waiting for God to keep his promises? How many of them understood what those promises really meant for them? Certainly we would expect that there were some people who held on to those promises just like Anna and Simeon. However, the full context of what we know about Israel at that time suggests that there probably were not many people who would have joined with Anna or Simeon in the sorts of praises they addressed to God when they saw the baby Jesus. There were likely not many who realized the depths of their sinfulness and acknowledged their need for a Savior. There were likely not many who would have looked at the little baby and believed that he was the Savior that they needed.

And that's the key reason that Christmas has a real impact on the lives of people. Simeon was a sinner. What abundant grace of God that he would give Simeon that promise: you will see the Savior with your own eyes. Anna was a sinner. What abundant grace of God that she would be given the same privilege. That's what we have in common with these believers from so long ago. Each and every one of us has failed and fallen. We are sinners, conceived in sin and born in sin and raised in sin. But God has not only sent a Savior, our Savior, into the world, he has also made sure that we have seen him. I know, not with our own physical eyes, but we have heard the message. Many of us gathered to hear the children of our congregation share that message just three weeks ago. Many of us gathered just one week ago to hear about and to sing about what happened on a silent night.

This child was special, so Simeon and Anna reacted and responded. Now they didn't share news about themselves. They didn't pat themselves on the back because they were the ones who knew the truth about the little baby in the Temple. They praised God. They talked about how he was sending salvation for people. They talked about how they, just like all around them, were dependent on God's grace and mercy and how they had it in this child Jesus.

This is God's grace to you: that you can look at the baby Jesus and realize that he is the One whom God promised and sent to take away your sins. That purely because of his Grace, God sent his Son to live for you and to die for you and to rise again! This is a miracle: that God says to you, "Look in the manger, and in the arms of Mary, and see your salvation." And this is a miracle: that he has led you to believe it and depend on it and celebrate it.

So as the world packs Christmas away once again, we linger a little longer. We look at that child and think about what he will become and what he will do. We think about the strokes that will pierce his mother's soul, the strokes that should pierce our souls as well. He is going to suffer for wrongs he didn't do and crimes he didn't commit. He is going to be abandoned by close friends, betrayed by his own follower. He is going to cause falling and rising, because not everyone is going to realize the truth about him. He is going to die, and he is going to rise again to live and rule forever.

And all we can do is shout his praise! Lord, thank you for showing me my salvation. Help me to celebrate it every day. Help me to share it with others. Help me to celebrate Christmas and to keep celebrating forever.

The Text: Luke 2:25–40 (NIV)

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

³³ The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.