

Unexpected Encounters

Text: Luke 2: 21-40

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Sermon:

Have you ever been utterly and completely spent? Have you been physically, emotionally, relationally spent—thoroughly worn out and worn down? I can’t imagine how Mary and Joseph must have been feeling by the time we get to this story—an immaculate conception and a journey to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey, along with a birth in the stable, visited by strangers proclaiming bizarre things from shepherds to

magi. No doubt, Mary and Joseph would have been utterly and thoroughly worn down and worn out; they would have gone back trudging with this little baby.

In Matthew's Gospel, they had a flight to Egypt; in Luke's Gospel, there's no time for that, but I can't imagine going back home would have been any easier. After all, when they left they were not married; when they returned, we have to assume they were not married, and that idea of pregnancy, that belly of Mary's, that fullness of life would now be the reality of a baby in her arms, coming back to settle at home and to make peace with neighbors who may or may not have been glad to see them come back. They were settling into a life that meant now that they've cleared that hurdle of giving birth, they were actually caring for the messiah of the whole world. Then, eight days later they have to pack up all over again—this time to head to Jerusalem. This time they were taking their part and staking their claim in an ancient tradition; this time the reading is full; it is dripping with words of ritual, dedication, commitment to God and commitment to covenant. Eight days later, worn down and worn out, Mary and Joseph are on the march again to do what their faith called them to do—to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

I can imagine as they made their way through that bustling complex known as the temple and as they finally secured what they needed for their sacrifice, and as they finally made their way forward and went through those two rituals—one for Jesus and one for Mary—that ended this cycle of birth and created this cycle of life—I gotta believe that they finally said, "Phew! Now, let's go home and get some peace." I imagine there was blessing and gift in all of it, and yet it had to be really hard. Everything that they were called to do had to finally catch up with them, and so I wonder if they were ready for everything that God was about to do?

For sometimes we get caught up in all the human ritual—all that we do—we cram these holy moments and holy days so full of things—that we forget to leave room for the fact that God is still doing things. Were they ready for what God was about to do and for the full gift of what was about to happen? It wasn't just those rituals, part of the time-honored way of this thing called faith; it was the truth that makes up this thing called faith. It was the most unlikely, impossible bringing together of these old ancient people with this tiny new baby, except as we know, if we're crazy enough to follow the Christmas story, we're also crazy enough to know that if God's behind it, then of course it happened that way.

There on their way out from this ritual in this huge complex, surrounded by crowds of people they run into two of the best characters in all of Luke's Gospel. The legend says that he was 112 years old. He was righteous and holy, which meant that he lived his life wanting to be for God; he lived his life wanting to fulfill the covenant; he was not just for himself but for God and neighbor. Simeon, 112 years old, with lines etched into his face—the one who waits patiently, and then there was 84 year old Anna, not just Anna but *prophet* Anna—did you hear that? Both were a mouthpiece for God. When Mary and Joseph were on their way out, worn down and worn out—were they ready for this gift God was about to give them—this gift of holy encounter? This was a gift of age and

wisdom and through them, gifts of perspective and hope were also offered, gifts that I know Mary would have held onto throughout her life, because we know that Mary takes things into her heart. Mary ponders them. Mary seeks to keep them with her as treasures.

I wonder as both of them lived into being the parents of the anointed one—with all of its joys as well as all of its challenges, bringing up a child—but not just any child—this child bound for his unique destiny; how would they receive these particular gifts: ancient Simeon who was an absolute anchor of faithful obedience and who waited in devotion to God—not just for his own deliverance and not just for his own care; it was not just so that he was made whole; in fact he was so ready for this life to be done; instead he was waiting, praying, working and being present for the consolation not of himself—but for the consolation of Israel—for the consolation of God’s people—for the consolation of everyone’s hopes and needs living in their tough times under Roman rule.

I wonder how in Mary’s life when she faced those difficult moments—like the moments when Jesus would have left to be baptized and then tempted in the wilderness—I wonder if she held onto the full and complete joy of that ancient face? I remember when my grandmother Minnie smiled, there was something so deep and joyous because the wrinkles and the wisdom and the age all came together in something far greater than anything else I knew? So I wonder if in those moments when Jesus was leaving for his ministry and the testing and difficulty, whether that creased smile of Simeon, encountered there in the most unlikely of ways came back to be a balm for her? I wonder if she remembered this most unlikely of encounters—when Jesus would continue his life and ministry and be drawn away from their home for years and later when he would be drawn in front of the greatest powers of earth—I wonder if Mary held onto this image of the one who was faithfully obedient, in recognizing Jesus’ obedience, even unto the cross—if she could hold onto this model, this message of Simeon’s obedience and somehow find peace in it?

I wonder if in the midst of it all, if this impossible encounter with this one reminded her that no matter how overwhelmed she felt in her life or in relation to his life, his death, or even his resurrection—that there are others—there have been others who have seen such things—I wonder if Simeon may have been that gift for her and then there was that amazing Anna—beacon of liberation and hope. Anna’s tenacity was real; she had been married to her husband for only seven years and that meant that she had probably been in the temple for more than sixty years following his death. She was a prophet, called to the temple to pray and be the voice of God to the people who were also there praying. Her whole entire life, a life marred by early loss of a beloved spouse, and yet she was one who carried on. I wonder when Mary faced all those losses if she remembered Anna who just kept showing up? I wonder if post-resurrection as Anna leaves to share her joy, if she was at all like Miriam, who was going out there dancing, telling anyone who would listen—listen to the Good News! I wonder if that became Mary’s mantra, even in the devastating loss of her son, sharing the Good News of what that means for all of us? I wonder how often in her own life Mary turned back to these two people?

I hope that in your own life, whatever challenges that you find and follow—that Simeon and Anna might be an unexpected encounter this morning that you turn to—that you lean on—that you look through and in to find the calling of your life. I am so happy that you came to this temple eight days after Christmas! I am so happy that you came here to remember our joint calling to be the body of Christ and to live into this thing called faith, but I also hope that you remember, despite the ritual of this whole thing—despite the ritual of showing up every week—that’s what on display here is the unexpected encounter. Maybe you thought of somebody here in this worship service; maybe you will encounter someone later today, but what I hope you do in this Christmas season that lingers for a couple more precious days—that like Mary and Joseph—that you remain open to the encounter because you never know when you will meet a wise ancient Simeon; you will never know when you will meet the very voice of God in someone like Anna. Hold onto the gifts that you receive this Christmas—the gifts of faith that have been nurtured and also remain open to the encounters that may happen when you least expect it—when you are down and out and when you are at the very end of what you think you can do, because then what happens is what God can do—encounters that not only help us endure but remind us of our calling to hold onto what these Advent candles represent—to hold onto hope, to hold onto peace, to hold onto joy, and to hold onto love, and to ground all of that in the mystery and the beauty of the one we know as Christ. May that be your gift this year.

Amen.

Rev. Brent Damrow