

Advent Sermon Series 2009

The “Lesser” Christmas Characters 4: Simeon and Anna ~ The Beginning of Times

Luke 1:21-38

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20 December 2009

The last of our Advent series focuses on two people that you may not have ever heard of. They aren't usually included in the Christmas story, as they meet Jesus well after the shepherds and the Magi have gone home. They are Simeon and Anna, and they occur only in the Gospel of Luke.

According to Jewish law, childbirth makes a woman ritually unclean. After a designated amount of time, which differs depending on whether the child was a boy or a girl (it appears girls make their mothers more unclean!), then the mother undergoes ritual purification. In addition, first-born sons had to be ritually “redeemed.” Way back in the olden days, first-born sons had to be dedicated to priestly service to God; later the priestly role was given to a specific tribe, the Levites. So arose the tradition of non-Levites “redeeming” back their first-born sons from God's service. Kind of ironic that Jesus underwent this ritual, even though he was the ultimate priest dedicated to God's service. But all of this also serves the purpose of showing that Jesus was from a good, law-abiding Jewish family.

At any rate, all these rituals are what get us to meet Simeon and Anna. According to tradition, Jesus was presented at the temple for Mary's purification and his redemption, about forty days after his birth, or February 2nd. And as his parents are bringing him to the Temple they meet two people. The first is Simeon, righteous and devout, and the Holy Spirit revealed that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah.

(In researching Simeon, I found that Orthodox tradition claims he was one of the translators of the Septuagint. This was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible performed by seventy-two rabbis, and it was this version of the Bible that New Testament writers refer to. The Orthodox story says that Simeon was trundling along on his translation job when he came to the verse in Isaiah about, “A virgin shall conceive a child.” That didn't make any logical sense, so he thought it must be a typo, but the Holy Spirit assured him that that was correct, and he would live to see it. In point of fact, the Septuagint does mistranslate that phrase. In Hebrew, it says, “A young woman shall conceive a child.” Greek has two possible words that could have been used, one meaning “a young woman,” and another meaning “virgin.” Modern Bible scholars make a huge fuss about this issue, but it's interesting to see that it's been around as long as the tradition of Simeon!

Anyway,) when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple, Simeon is waiting for them. He takes the child and blesses him, using words that have been immortalized in Christian liturgy as the “*Nunc dimittis*” for the Latin translation, and is used at the end of a worship service. “Holy One, now dismiss your servant in peace, your word has been fulfilled. For my eyes have seen the salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light to reveal you to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.”

He then offers a blessing both upon Jesus and also Mary, though what he says is not what a new mother really wants to hear. “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” Lovely, that.

And right on Simeon's heels comes Anna, an old widow and a prophet who had lived and served in the temple for decades. Her words are not recorded, which given what Simeon told Mary might be a blessing after all. Instead Luke simply says she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

What strikes me about Simeon and Anna is that neither of them will live to see this infant grow up and accomplish the things he was destined to do. Neither of them lives to see that promise in him fulfilled. They are both well advanced in years. Anna is noted as being 84, and if Simeon was indeed one of the Septuagint translators, he would have to be well into his second century. Yet they meet Jesus when he is not even two months old. They won't see him grow up. All they see in him is the beginning.

It's interesting, because many Christians today are so focused on the end of times. They want to be around to see the end, and they want it to happen in their lifetime. While we in the UCC don't tend to focus too much on apocalypses and raptures, even we can get caught up in this notion of fulfillment, of everything being completed. When is God going to finally bring about that justice and peace that we long for? In other words, when is God going to fix this world? Get the job done!

But that's not what Simeon and Anna are about. It is enough for them to see the beginning. They're not eager to have God finish. All that they want is to see God get started. What a contrast to what the rest of us tend to focus on!

The nearest thing I have experienced in my life was when I was a youth minister. I worked with these kids for a couple of years out of their lives. I had no idea if the seeds I tried to plant in them would truly take root, or if everything I tried to pass on to them would wither away when the kids moved on to college. Teachers surely feel the same thing, too, or anyone who works with kids. It's different from parenting; because parents expect to see their kids grow up. They expect to be able to see their labors bear fruit in later years. But those who are with kids for only a brief time in their lives, we don't know how those kids will turn out. It takes a tremendous amount of faith to be a teacher or youth minister or mentor or even school nurse. We play a small role, but we will not see the fulfillment of our work. We will not get to see these children when they are grown up and "finished." All we see is the beginning, and our own small role in the development of a human life.

That's why this is a really good way to think about advent, and the coming of Christ, God-with-us. For advent has a double-meaning. We remember the birth of Christ, but we also await his coming all over again, whether it's his coming at the end of times or just his coming into our hearts. Advent looks back, but it also looks to the future. Yet there are different ways of looking to the future. As I already mentioned, apocalyptic thinking, or the end times, is a way of looking at the future as the final period, the full stop at the end of the sentence. God will be done with it all and everything will be over. It reduces our role to merely one of waiting, sitting back and waiting for God to do everything for us.

That is definitely NOT what Simeon and Anna were doing. They weren't sitting around waiting for God to get busy. Rather, like those teachers and youth ministers, they were active doing their own part, a small but vital role in God's grand scheme of things. For them, the future wasn't the end. Rather, it was the stage on which God would be working.

How do we see advent? As something that happened long ago and is over and done with? Or as something that will happen in the future, and be over and done with then? Or do we see it rather as the beginning of times? That God is at work now in the world? We will not live to see the end of it. Rather, we are privileged to see at least a little bit of it unfold

for those few years that we are granted life on this earth. After all, it's not as if God stopped working when Jesus was born, or even after he was resurrected. It's not as if God is sitting around twiddling her thumbs until it's time to get busy again for the end of time. In the words of the old hymn, "God is working his purpose out as year proceeds to year." I looked up the words to that hymn, and while it is not considered an advent hymn, nevertheless the words made me think of Simeon and Anna. They speak well to us as we consider the choices that the advent of Christ presents to us. It reads, "What can we do to work God's work, to prosper and increase the brotherhood of all mankind, the reign of the Prince of Peace? All we can do is nothing worthwhile unless God blesses the deed; vainly we hope for the harvest-tide till God gives life to the seed. Yet nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be, when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea."

God is at work now. The fulfillment of the promise that we've been waiting for is already underway. The question is, will we sit back and wait, thereby missing out on our chance to be a part of God's work? Or will we leap into the fray, rejoicing in the opportunity to play our part? What if teachers said, "I'm only with these kids for one year, what I do doesn't make a difference in the grand scheme of things." What if youth ministers said, "I won't be around when these kids are in college, nothing I do matters." What if anyone who works with kids thought that their moment, however brief, was unimportant? Not only would they fail those kids in their future life, they would fail those kids in the present. Are we willing to fail God, too?

We only have a moment. But what a moment it can be! Only when we have done our part and played our role can we echo the words Simeon said, which are not so much a dismissal as a blessing. "Holy One, now dismiss your servant in peace, your word has been fulfilled. For my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light to reveal you to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel."