

That Was Worth Waiting For

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 5, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Luke 2:22-38](#) and [Exodus 13:11-16](#)

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“When [the shepherds] saw [exactly what the angels had told them they would find], they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

When we hear these verses from the second chapter of Luke's gospel, we think we've heard the end of the Christmas story. If you're like me, you imagine granddad closing the book he's been reading out of. It's a sweet ending to a sweet story – Mary pondering what she's heard and the shepherds returning to the hills and their flocks praising and glorifying God.

Except it's not the end of the story. It's only the beginning of the beginning of the story. Giving birth to a baby is always only the beginning. In some ways, it's the easy part. The poet Kaitlin Hardy Shetler reflected:

Sometimes I wonder
if Mary breastfed Jesus.
if she cried out when he bit her
or if she sobbed when he would not latch.¹

As good Jews (and Luke makes a big point of showing that Mary and Joseph were good Jews), there were religious obligations to fulfill, in addition to worrying about breastfeeding and diaper cleaning. When he was eight days old, they had to have the baby circumcised. This was also when Jesus was officially named – the name given by the angel before he was conceived. And there was a purification obligation. And there was the obligation to offer a sacrifice in place of the first-born son.

Luke sort of mashes these last two obligations together. Mary, not both parents, needed to undergo a rite of purification after giving birth (see Leviticus 12:2-8). And then the parents needed to present a sacrificial offering in lieu of a first-born child, because the first-born child belongs “to the Lord,” as we heard in our second lesson from Exodus.²

Don't gloss over the part about Jesus' parents offering two birds as the sacrifice. This places them in the ranks of the poor. Had they had wealth, they would have presented

¹ This is the first stanza of an unnamed poem attributed to Kaitlin Hardy Shetler, posted by Traci Blackmon, *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/traci.blackmon/posts/10219831021187339>, (posted and accessed 18 December 2019).

² John T. Carroll, “Luke 2:21-24: Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 47.

a lamb. This echoes a theme earlier in Luke's gospel, when Mary sings of her solidarity with the poor, a solidarity she shares with God.³

It's pretty clear that one of Luke's points is that this family is Jewish, that they are good Jews who follow the law of Moses. The fulfilling of the law also serves a narrative purpose. The story of the presentation at the Temple gets the Holy Family onto the Temple grounds. That's where Mary, Joseph, and their new-born had to go to make their sacrifice. That, in itself, isn't unusual. Like thousands of other families that year, Mary and Joseph presented their first-born child at the Temple and offered their sacrifice. But this is no ordinary family, and their baby is no ordinary child.

I imagine Simeon and Anna coming to the Temple, week after week, month after month, year after year, and looking at all the babies brought to the Temple. Temple regulars were probably used to these two elderly people oo-ing and ah-ing over babies, but never seeming to be fully satisfied with what they saw. This time, something was different. This time, when they looked at the baby, they knew that they are in a *kairos* moment, they are at a turning point. Everything was changing.

The Greek has two words for talking about time. There's *chronos*, the word from which we get "chronology." This is linear time. This is measurable time. This is time on a straight timeline. And then there's *kairos*. This is time that is full, that is pregnant with possibilities. This is where – or when – time bends.

Simeon took the baby in his arms declared that he could now die in peace, for he has seen God's salvation. The theologian William Greenway points out that Simeon doesn't declare that he can die in peace because he believes that he will live again after death. He doesn't say that he can die in peace because he is sure that Jesus will bring a sociopolitical revolution. The salvation Simeon sees is actually about living – "living in the light of the love of God for one's own and for every other Face, living in the light of a power greater even than our fear of death, living in *koinonia*, [in a deep, life-giving fellowship], living in the communion of *shalom*."⁴

Theologian John Carroll says, "Simeon's prayer-oracle blends grateful praise and bold prophecy. He affirms the fulfillment of Israel's long-deferred hopes of divine deliverance; this is the reasons for a people's consolation, as well as for his personal sense of 'release' to a death in peace. He also expands the scope of the blessing to encompass all nations, in the spirit of ... [the prophet] Isaiah."⁵

And then there's Anna. I wish Luke told us more about Anna. It is worth noting that Luke calls her a "prophet." That is an important title, especially for a woman. I just wish Luke told us more about what she said. Instead, all we learn is that Anna, the first to tell the good news of Jesus in Luke's gospel, starts telling the people who have been waiting for the redemption of Israel all about the child.

³ *Ibid*, 49.

⁴ William Greenway, "Luke 2:25-40: Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospels: Luke, Volume 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 52.

⁵ John T. Carroll, *op. cit.*, 53.

One of the things I've noticed about the nativity stories – both Luke's and Matthew's – is that they are full of mystics.⁶ The stereotype many of us carry sees mystics as people who have the experience of ecstatic union with the divine, and that this type of experience is reserved for a few rarefied saints. I, however, prefer Ruth Haley Barton's view of what a mystic is. "[M]ystics are those who really believe what the rest of us say we believe – that God is real, that God is mystery (that is, totally beyond our human comprehension), that God can be encountered in the depths of our being, and that our human lives can be radically oriented and responsive to the One who is always present with us.

"Mystics are those who are open to actual encounters with God that are often unmediated by religious trappings. These encounters are often given to those who find themselves on the fringes of institutional religious structures while remaining radically committed to what is truest about our faith. Mystics are those who have a longing for God that is so profound that they make radical choices to seek God and respond to God's leading in their lives."⁷

Think about the principle players in the nativity stories (except for Herod). By this definition, they're all mystics. In Matthew's gospel, there's Joseph who pays attention to the divine presences in his dreams. And there are magi who were paying attention to the signs in the heavens in such a way that the signs drew them to Jerusalem. And these same magi paid attention to their dreams in a way that sent them home by another way.

In Luke's gospel, we have Zechariah who encounters an angel in the holiest spot in the Temple. And Mary who listens to the angel's invitation. And Elizabeth, her cousin, who senses the holiness of the moment when Mary comes for a visit. And shepherds who go investigate what the angel proclaimed. And then there are Simeon and Anna, elders (with all the wisdom that title confers), who saw in Jesus the salvation of the world.

The mischievous part of me imagines, after Simeon offered his blessing-oracle and Anna finished prophesying about Jesus (for the morning, at least), that the two of them got together and said to each other, almost simultaneously, "*That was worth waiting for.*" And then I start to wonder, what made them keep coming back to the Temple, day after day? What empowered their faithfulness, their trust, that they would live to that *kairos* moment when they, in their wisdom, could see the world changing?

I have found the first four days of 2020 to be emotionally and spiritually difficult. The disastrous fires and scorching heat across the entire continent of Australia have, in the past three months, released as much carbon into the atmosphere as the entire country produces from every car, home, and factory in a typical eight-month period.⁸ As Bill McKibben puts it, "Climate chaos feeds on itself now."⁹

⁶ I am indebted to Ruth Haley Barton, "Epiphany: A Dangerous Journey," *Transforming Center*, <https://transformingcenter.org/2020/01/epiphany-a-dangerous-journey/> (posted 2 January 2020; accessed 3 January 2020), for this insight.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Mike Foley, "Bushfires spew two-thirds of national carbon emissions in one season," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/bushfires-spew-two-thirds-of-national-carbon-emissions-in-one-season-20200102-p53oez.html> (posted 2 January 2020; accessed 3 January 2020).

⁹ Bill McKibben, Twitter post <https://twitter.com/billmckibben/status/1213095386887475200> (posted and accessed 3 January 2020).

Meanwhile, because of what were described by officials as “not ordinary rains”¹⁰ (though extraordinary weather is the new climate chaos norm), the flooding and mudslides in and around Jakarta has led to over 50 deaths and around 400,000 people displaced.¹¹

And as if that wasn’t bad enough, the United States moved closer war with Iran by killing Iranian General Soleimani on Thursday.

Like I said, the first four days of 2020 were emotionally and spiritually difficult.

I like to start the new year with the hope that comes from a vision of what could be. I like to start the new year thinking about the things that I want to see happen in my lifetime and plotting how to help make them happen. I would love to see sufficient global action to mitigate the impacts of climate change. I would love to see the growth of equality – all kinds of equality – within the United States and around the world. I would love to see the rise of political leaders who embrace and act on a vision of peace that is grounded in justice and mutual respect. I would love to see these things happen in my lifetime, and if I did, I think I would depart in peace.

But right now, all these things I want to see seem so far away. That’s why, today, what I would like is to be a little more of a mystic. Today, I would simply like to be more attentive to the presence of God with us. Today, I would like to have the spiritual stamina of Anna and Simeon.

How about you?

Questions for contemplation:

What would you like to see happen in your lifetime?

What spiritual practice could you embrace that might help you to be more of a mystic?

¹⁰ “Jakarta floods: ‘Not ordinary rain’, say officials,” *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-50969418> (posted and accessed 2 January 2020).

¹¹ Rashaan Ayesh, “Death toll rises in Indonesia flooding landslides and flooding,” *Axios*, <https://www.axios.com/death-indonesia-landslides-flooding-426ccbd-3dfe-4aee-9ec8-1d3eda35352f.html> (posted and accessed 4 January 2020).