

Anticipating Christmas

The Story of Simeon & Anna – Luke 2

Most people have a bucket list– a list of things they want to do before they die. I had a youth pastor friend whose big bucket list item was to go sky diving. Now, that’s on my list of ways I don’t want to die.

For some, their bucket list item might be somewhere they want to go. Later today we will pick up our daughter, Alyssa, as she flies home from her semester in Ecuador. For her that was a bucket list item. She has dreamed of studying abroad since early in high school, and we’re glad she got that opportunity.

For others, their item might include meeting certain people– personal heroes, influential people. A few weeks ago I got to attend a NASCAR race with what’s called a hot pass. It gave complete access to the pits and garage area all weekend long. We got to meet drivers, tour the haulers that are complete workshops on wheels, see them work on the cars. It was kind of a bucket list item for me. One of the things though was doing it with my dad. I’m a race fan because of him, and because we had garage access, he got to meet some of his personal heroes. Two of the biggest ones were Bill Elliott and Richard Petty. My dad was like a little kid on Christmas morning. Here, take my picture.

What’s on your bucket list?

We’re going to meet a couple of people this morning who got to check off their one big bucket list item. Their names are Simeon and Anna. You won’t find them in any manger scene. You won’t find them on any Christmas card. We don’t sing any Christmas carols about them, but they are just as much a part of the Christmas story as the Wise Men or the Shepherds. You’ll find their stories in Luke 2 just after the story of the shepherds.

Both of them had spent years, decades eagerly anticipating the arrival of the Messiah. And now, Jesus has finally come, and God grants Simeon and Anna this lifelong wish to see His anointed one, to see the promised Savior.

We have seen that Jesus was welcomed into this world by an ensemble cast of unlikely characters. Foreign stargazers who came from far off to worship Jesus. The shepherds came from only next door, but they came from the lowest levels of their society. It doesn’t matter how far away you are, or how low you are, you are never too far or too low that Jesus doesn’t want you to find him.

Simeon and Anna come from yet another extreme. Both at the end of their lives. Past their prime we would say. They would never be at the top of anyone’s guest list, but here they are taking center stage in Luke 2. In fact, they are the last of Jesus’ story for 12 years until we get

one little story about Jesus in the temple. And then it's another 18 years of quiet before Jesus' story picks up again.

What can we learn from these two elderly saints of old? Well, there's at least this— they modeled a life lived in eager expectation of the Savior. It's a reminder that, that as we anticipate Christmas, should also live in anticipation of Jesus' coming.

(Read Luke 2:21-40)

Luke squeezes a lot in these first few verses. There are three rituals or ceremonies happening in this passage. The first is Jesus' circumcision. A part of God's covenant with Abraham was this outward sign to set apart the people of God from all the pagan people around them. It was a reminder to them at the most intimate level that they belonged to God.

When it comes to such personal areas, we consider such matters to be private, right? We even call them privates. It's private. It's personal. It's nobody else's business but mine. And yet it's at this most intimate level God gives them this reminder, "You are a special person. You belong to me. You've been set apart."

Jesus' circumcision also tells us that Jesus is undoubtedly God in the FLESH. You don't get any more physical than than the ol' snip snip. This is also the occasion when Jesus would have been formally named, and they give him the name given by then angel. What mixture of the human and divine.

Circumcision would have been done on the 8th day. This would have happened while they were still in Bethlehem, and likely would be done by a local Rabbi who would say prayer of blessing, then they would drink a cup of wine. They probably all would need a shot or two after that.

The second ritual was what was called purification. The bloody mess of childbirth made the mother and anyone assisting in the baby's delivery ceremonially unclean. This is likely rooted all the way back at the beginning of Genesis. Childbirth was never intended to be the bloody painful process that it is. That is one of the consequences of the fall, the sin of Adam and Eve. It's a reminder of our sinfulness. So, According to the Law of Moses, a new mother was to wait 40 days, then go to the priest at the temple and make a sacrifice. The sacrifice would either be a lamb without blemish, or if you were poor as were the newlyweds Joseph and Mary, two doves or pigeons were also acceptable.

The third ceremony that is happening in this passage is what was known as the consecration of the firstborn. According to covenant God had given Moses, the first fruits and the first born of all that they had were to be dedicated to God. That meant the first of the harvest that was brought in was given to the Lord. The first lambs, the first calves, the first offspring of all their flocks and herds were offered to God. Even firstborn sons were to be dedicated to God, and there was a ceremony to be done at the temple.

So, forty-one days after Jesus is born, Joseph and Mary find themselves at the temple observing these rites. It's worth pointing out that Jesus was raised in a devout home where faithful religious service was observed.

When it comes to religious customs and rituals, they can either be sacred moments, or empty gestures; mindless ritual hollowed of all meaning, or treasured reminders filled significance and heart. It doesn't matter whether it's the consecration of the firstborn, or communion, or mealtime prayer. It's not in the observance or ritual itself, it's in the focus of your heart and mind.

We have a saying posted on the wall above our headboard. "Always kiss me goodnight." Now, I confess I don't always do it, but the principle of the goodnight kiss is still there. That goodnight kiss can be one of two things. It can be a meaningless ritual, a duty to check off the keep-wife-happy list, or It can be a celebration of the relationship we have, a reassurance and reminder of what holds us together. The outward act is the same either way, but it's a different focus of the heart.

The same is true with our own rituals of faith whether it's going church, daily prayer, regularly reading your Bible, giving, going to Sunday school, Bible study or youth group. These can be meaningless rituals and dull duties to perform, or they can be an expression and celebration of relationship, the relationship you have with God through his Son he sent to save you, and with his other imperfect people.

What does this have to do with Simeon and Anna? Mary and Joseph and Jesus would never have met Simeon and Anna if they weren't in the temple faithfully observing these sacred moments. You will encounter and experience God when you are at the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing. That's not to say that God can't show up at the wrong place or the wrong time. He will chase you from one end of the earth to the gates of hell, if he's after your soul.

But God blesses those who faithfully observe those sacred moments that have been handed down to us. Don't forsake the assembly of the saints. Don't neglect your time in prayer. Don't starve your heart and mind of the word of God. For in them are those sacred moments in which we encounter and experience the blessings of God. How many Simeons and Annas do we miss because we are somewhere else doing something else?

Waiting on God

The first character we meet in the temple courts is Simeon. We aren't given any human credentials. He doesn't seem to be a priest or a prophet. He was just a godly man. He's called righteous and devout. That means he lived according to God's standards and had a deep reverence for God. God doesn't care about your resume. He doesn't care about your degree, or lack of one. He just wants you to love Him.

The impression we get of Simeon is a man of God that has been waiting for years, and God grants him his bucket list wish.

The second character they meet in the temple courts is a widow and prophetess named Anna. We're told that she was very old, and that after only 7 years of marriage her husband died. The text says either she was a widow until she was eighty-four, or that she was a widow for that long. It could be understood both ways.

Either way, she had been alone for at least 6 decades. Following the death of her husband, her life could have gone in any number of directions. She could have wallowed in sorrow and pity. She could have

endless tried to fill that empty space with another man. Her life could have been spent in selfish and pleasurable pursuits. But Anna did none of those things. Instead, she spent her life in prayer and fasting and worship in the temple. God was her husband now, and she spent her life in faithful devotion to him.

Our text says Simeon was waiting on the consolation of Israel and that Anna after seeing Jesus shared the good news with others like herself who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. Those are just two ways of saying the same thing. The coming of the Messiah would be the fulfillment of everything that God's people had been promised. Generations of prophets and divine promises would be fulfilled in Jesus. That was the consolation of Israel, the redemption of Jerusalem.

And Simeon had been faithfully waiting for that day. Anna had been looking forward to this day. It's the same word in the Greek in both places. It means to have an eager expectation. This isn't just waiting in a doctor's office, it's living your life in anticipation of something happening.

There is a difference between just waiting and waiting with eager expectation. One is passive. The other is active. One is simply looking at the clock on the wall. The other is making sure everything is ready and prepared.

Waiting with eager expectation is how a child waits for Christmas morning. The kid happily helps mom clean the house so they can set up the tree. He sets out milk and cookies. He reminds dad to remove the logs and the grate from the fireplace so Santa come down the chimney. "Don't light a fire tonight, daddy."

Waiting with eager expectation was how I waited for Teresa when we dating and I lived in Kansas and she lived in Oklahoma. I would have the house perfectly clean. I'd make sure the food was ready to go. I made sure the right CD was loaded into the stereo and it was cued on the right song so that as soon as her little blue Ford Escort pulled into the driveway, I could hit play, and she would hear the song as she came to the door.

These are two people who had lived their lives waiting in eager anticipation of Christmas. They didn't call it that, but that's what they were waiting for. That eager anticipation defined their lives. They lived their lives in eager anticipation of Jesus' first coming.

Do you know how we are to live our lives? In eager anticipation of Jesus' second coming. Christmas reminds us that we should live our lives eagerly waiting for Jesus' coming.

Philippians 3:20-21 says, *"Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we **await** a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself."*

Hebrews 9:28 says, *"So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are **eagerly waiting** for him."*

But waiting is not easy. Tom Petty was right, "The waiting is the hardest part." We don't like to wait. We'll walk half a mile in Wal-Mart just to find the shortest line. We get impatient waiting for the

microwave and we think Minute Rice takes too long. We want what we want, and we want it now. "I have a structured settlement and I need...."

But there is one time we will wait, and that's when the wait is worth it. We will happily wait whenever whatever is at the end of our wait is worth it. People wait in long lines for Black Friday sales? Why? Personally, I think they're gluttons for punishment, but they want to score that \$100 big screen. People wait in long lines for great food at a great restaurant. I have waited in long lines to get good seats at a concert.

Here's the thing about waiting on Jesus. Everybody is waiting on something. They're waiting on the right job, the right opportunity, the right investment. They're waiting on winning the lottery or for the right relative to die. They're waiting on right boyfriend, the right girlfriend, the right relationship. They're waiting on finding the mythical, "the one." So many times, I've heard people say, "Well, I'm waiting on this. I'm waiting on that. When this happens. When that happens." Some people spend their entire lives waiting on something that will never happen. Some people are just waiting to die. There's always something down the line promising something it will never deliver.

Waiting on Jesus is not like that. When Simeon was waiting on Jesus' first coming, he was waiting on a sure and certain thing. Anna wasn't living a life based in unrealistic fantasy. They were waiting for a sure and certain hope.

In Romans 8:23-24a Paul describes life this way, *"we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved."* It's that feeling that life has to be more than this. We instinctively know that there has to be something more, something better. And so, we wait.

In Titus 2:13, Paul calls it, *"waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."*

Your greatest hope will never be found in a paycheck. Your greatest hope will never be on a piece of paper that you frame and hang on your office wall. Your greatest hope will not be found with the right man or the right woman to complete you. Our greatest hope will never be found in who sits in what office in Washington DC.

Our greatest hope, our blessed hope is that God created us, that God loves us, that He sent his one and only Son to save us, and through Jesus we can have real relationship with our Creator and Savior, and the expectation of an eternal life with him.

And it's not just a future hope. It's an eager expectation that redefines our life now. It refocuses our life now. It gives our life meaning and purpose now. It helps put everything into proper perspective now.

Nothing is worth more than waiting expectantly on Jesus. If you were to find Simeon or Anna right after they found Jesus, and you were to ask this question, "Was it worth it?" What do you think they would say? "Was it worth waiting all that time? Was it worth waiting all those years? Was Jesus worth it?"

We get a clue as to what they thought by what they said and did. Simeon takes Jesus into his arms. I would love to know was he grinning from ear to ear, or did he choke up with emotion. Did he laugh? Did he cry? Did he do both? Did the words just flow from his lips, or did he have to fight for every syllable?

He praised God in part with these words?

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
 you may now dismiss[d] your servant in peace.
 For my eyes have seen your salvation,
 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
 and the glory of your people Israel.”

Can I translate this for you? Lord, you can take me now. I can die a happy man, because I have seen your salvation. I’m ready to come home. If Simeon never made it home after meeting Jesus, I don’t think it would bother him one bit.

How about Anna? Even though she was a prophetess, Luke records no words of prophecy about Jesus or no blessing given to Joseph and Mary. It simply says that she, *“thanked God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”*

Just like the shepherds earlier she couldn’t keep the good news to herself. She had to tell others. But she didn’t just run through the temple courts shouting the good news to anyone and everyone. She was far more selective in her audience. She looked for other like-minded people who were also looking forward to Christmas. She found others who were eagerly waiting.

Anna would now wouldn’t she. She spent every day in the temple. Verse 37 says, *“She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.”* She knew who came regularly. She overheard their prayers. How many conversations had she shared with these like-minded souls? How many times had they talked about their hopes and dreams, their bucket list, their eager expectations?

The reason she searched them out and told them is because everything they had been eagerly waiting for had finally arrived. If you were to ask Anna if Jesus was worth it, she would say, *“Absolutely.”*

Let me end with this question, what are you waiting for? Jesus is coming. Are you ready?