They end up in the center of a little brouhaha, all the same. Two elderly worshipers, Simeon and Anna, regulars at the temple, have something remarkable to say to the holy family. Some years back, Simeon heard the voice of God, the Holy Spirit, speaking to him. “You will not taste death,” the Spirit told him, “until you have seen the Messiah with your own eyes.” This old timer’s been looking for the Messiah ever since. When Simeon gets to the temple that day he sees no powerful orator, no victorious general, just a tradesman from the north country and his young wife. She’s cradling a baby in her arms. Luke tells us that Simeon recognized Jesus because he was “led by the Spirit.” Simeon speaks some words of prophecy. But we’ll come back to those in a minute. Let’s first look at the other venerable witness, Anna.

We know even less about Anna than we do about Simeon. Luke tells us that she is a widow, and well up in her 80s. She comes to the temple each day to pray and stays well into the night. Anna sits in the outer court of the temple in her usual spot, eyes closed, lips pursed, intoning the words of the psalms. There are worshipers who come regularly to the temple precincts, but none are more faithful than Anna. She is a familiar sight to those who pass by her: a deeply pious woman who keeps to herself. She radiates such holiness that her face seems to glow with divine peace.

On this day, Anna suddenly stops, mid-prayer. Her eyes flash open. Her head turns. Her eyes rest on that young mother and her newborn son. Anna is a contemplative woman of few words, but this day finds her unusually verbal. She gets up and scurries from person to person, leaning on her walking-stick, urging them not to miss seeing this very special child. He is the One, she announces, with breathless excitement, the Messiah who will redeem God’s people!

So, there you have it. Two exceptionally pious and holy individuals. Simeon and Anna would be unknown to us, were it not for this singular incident in Luke’s gospel. We might wonder why Luke includes this story. Surely the testimony of the angels is far more impressive than anything these two elderly witnesses have to say! What could they possibly add? What they add is the human dimension. We can see in them more of the sort of faith we all hope to have. The angels already know who Jesus is. They’ve known him from the beginning of time. But Simeon and Anna can only wait, not knowing who it is for whom they are waiting. They can only believe that they will one day see the Messiah, at which time their longings will be justified, their hopes fulfilled, their dreams realized.

When he sees the baby Jesus, Simeon says to God is *“my eyes have seen your salvation.”*This is a remarkable statement with far-reaching implications. In the past, Israel saw many noteworthy figures (prophets, priests, and kings), but this child is different. This child is all three. As a prophet, Jesus will speak God’s truth to God’s people. As a priest, Jesus will intercede with God on behalf of a sinful people. As a king, Jesus will lead his people into God’s promised future. Jesus will not only lead the people to salvation, but he will also *be* their salvation.

Simeon says God that prepared this salvation *“in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”* This sort of claim isn’t entirely new. Isaiah said much the same thing, centuries before, about the Messiah who is to come. Still, Simeon’s direct language is startling. This helpless babe in his mother’s arms is somehow going to change the world.

But then the old man’s prophecy grows dark. *“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…”* All will not be sweetness and light. This baby will bring salvation to the earth, but he will also bring division between people. Just as Mary’s earlier words speak of the mighty being cast down from their thrones and the lowly being exalted, so too, this child will leave a heavy footprint on the world (Luke 1:46-55).

Then, Simeon gets up close and personal, speaking directly to Mary *“…and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”* How can he know what is to come? Can he envision the scene, some 30 years in the future, when Jesus will hang bleeding on the cross” (John 19)? Mary’s grief at the foot of the cross might well be described as the piercing by a sword, as she beholds what no parent should ever witness. Simeon knows Mary’s life will be one of indescribable joy, but also gut-wrenching pain.

Not exactly the sort of thing you write inside a new-baby congratulations card. But Simeon pulls no punches. He tells it like it is, with the frank speech typical of one who has seen much and waited long. He does not want this sweet young woman to be unprepared when her life turns unexpectedly tragic. “Soak it all in,” he is saying to her, “all of it: the bad as well as the good. For you can hardly expect to have the full experience of being human without knowing heartache as well as joy.”

The amazing thing about Simeon’s prophecy is that it shows that this child will be a light for the Gentiles also. The salvation of Jesus began with Israel but was always to be extended beyond Israel. “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.”

Simeon now had the peace of seeing God’s promise fulfilled in his life. It was as if Simeon were commanded by God to keep a lonely watch through the night until he saw the sun come up. This now was, for him, God’s sunrise, and because Jesus had come, Simeon could be relieved of his watch. Both Simeon and Anna might be excused for being bitter or dispirited – they had lived long, seen much, suffered more – but instead, they were happy, hopeful, joy-filled at seeing Jesus.

Imagine how the biblical story would be different had Simeon and Anna focused on the bad things that were happening all around them! They lived with disease, famine, banditry, and slavery. Life expectancy was short. The Roman overlords stepped up their oppression of the Jewish people. There was no shortage of bad things to commiserate about. Yet, when these two wise elders of Israel catch a glimpse of the baby Jesus in his mother’s arms, they both intuitively zero in on the tremendous potential for good present in this child, who is the Son of God.

English Bible commentator John Trapp (1601-1669) quoted poetically what Simeon and Anna felt in their hearts:

“I fear no sin, I dread no death;

I have lived long enough, I have my life;

I have longed enough, I have my love;

I have seen long enough, I have my light;

I have served enough, I have my saint;

I have sorrowed enough, I have my joy;

Sweet babe, let this psalm serve as a lullaby to thee, and for a funeral for me.

Oh, sleep in my arms, and let me sleep in thy peace.”

*The Son of God!* Born in their very midst? Who could have imagined it would happen in their lifetimes? It is all in how we look at it. If Christmas teaches us anything, it is that there is more potential in the birth of a baby than in any threat — real or imagined — we could ever imagine. When that baby is the Son of God, the powers of death and disorder flee in disarray. Listen well to the words of Simeon and Anna, words from the truly wise.

Prayer:God of today and tomorrow, we know that your fingerprints are all over this world. And we know that those who dream cannot keep silent. So today we pray, give us eyes to see you. Give us courage to trust you. Give us lips to speak of you in our midst. Gratefully we pray, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**A Word from the Wise**

Sunday, December 31, 2023 [Luke 2:22-40](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+2%3a22-40&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

There is always a bit of a letdown after Christmas. All that pressure: the preparations, presents and people coming together from across the miles! The pressure focuses like a laser beam on one day out of the year. When it’s over, it’s over. There is still a good deal of commercial activity going on, of course, down at the mall: returns, gift-card redemptions, and bargain-basement prices on cards and wrapping paper. But that’s just clean-up. The big secular holiday is over. There is something forlorn about this last gasp of post-dated Christmas shopping.

Which is just the opposite of the way the church looks at the post-Christmas season. From now until Epiphany, January 6, we find ourselves in the bright and joyous season that began on Christmas Eve. But it’s tough to sell *that* in a culture that believes the Christmas season lasts from Halloween to Christmas Day! For most of our neighbors, after December 25th the Christmas hope winks out like the lights of an unplugged Christmas tree.

The story that comes up in the lectionary for today, the presentation of Jesus in the temple, may seem a bit like post-Christmas clean-up. In time, an angel will warn Mary and Joseph about a threat to their newborn’s life, and they will flee to Egypt. But for now, their task is presenting their new baby boy in the temple. There, he receives a special blessing. His mother, Mary, also goes through the rite of purification, obligatory for Jewish women after childbirth.

Mary and Joseph bring with them a couple of small birds, turtledoves or pigeons, for the sacrifice. That little detail tells a lot about Mary and Joseph. The ordinary sacrificial offering for this purpose was a lamb and a pigeon, items way out of this couple’s price range; but the law of Moses takes mercy on the poor. There was a special provision for poor parents, who barely have two shekels to rub together. The law permitted them to substitute a second bird for the lamb.

Mary and Joseph probably appeared utterly unremarkable as they walked into the temple with two cooing birds in a battered wooden cage. Just another working-class couple, doing the right thing with their baby, according to the law of Moses. If they harbor any delusions of grandeur on account of the shepherds and the angels, don’t show up here.