

Cindy Voth, Pastor of Community Life
Your beauty revealed
December 27, 2015
Luke 2:21-40

I often joke with my husband Luke that patience is a virtue I lack. I have been known to say things like “waiting is so overrated” or “who has patience, really?” Together we have joined for the past five weeks to do just that... join in patiently and expectantly waiting for the arrival of Jesus.

During the past four Sundays we have had a focus statement for each Sunday. On Advent one it was: In a world of anxiety and fear we call on God to rend the heavens and come down in power. On Advent two: In a disturbed and noisy world we hear God say, “Comfort, comfort my people.” Advent three: In a world of grief and despair God’s Spirit clothes us in celebration and joy. Last week, advent four was: In a world of loneliness and isolation God makes a home with us. We have been waiting and waiting and waiting. We have been challenged to join in the preparations. Not the preparations of preparing our homes or decorating the trees, cleaning the house for extended family to come visit, filling our freezers with favorite Christmas goodies, or searching the ends of the earth for that perfect gift for the last person on your Christmas list that you have no idea what to buy. Instead we have been challenged to join the preparations with Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah. We have been challenged to join our voices in crying out our heartfelt desire that God would reveal God’s hope, peace, joy, and love.

Today we celebrate Christmas, the arrival of the Christ Child, born of a virgin, wrapped in blankets and placed in the feed trough of animals. Each year as we arrive at Christmas Sunday I am reminded that as one author says, “Faithful preparation during Advent puts Christmas into its proper place, not as a comforting destination where chestnuts roast on an open fire, but as the

completely disruptive in-breaking of the God who, through this birth, reveals the divine mystery and sheds new light on all things.”¹

Today we focus on the Christ Child, the one we have expectantly been waiting for. In our text today we read what Simeon saw when he saw Jesus. I wonder, what do you see today as you see Jesus? Seeing a newborn baby can evoke a variety of emotions, often varied depending on our journey to that baby as well as our relationship to him or her. Usually upon seeing a newborn baby we comment on physical appearance such as “Look at all that hair!” or “what long fingers she has!” I do not think it is common to gather around a newborn baby and proclaim what he or she will do in the world. Such as oh Elijah you are going to grow up and use your skills and passions and creativity to become an architect and you will design the most unique buildings in all of North America! Or little Lydia you will have such gifts in hospitality and communicating that you will open a retreat center and people will flock from around the world to stay under your care and learn under your leadership. No, instead we oh and ah of the pink wrinkled skin, fuzzy hair, and miracle of the birth of the baby.

However, gathering around the long awaited Christ Child calls for a different response within each one of us. In addition sitting in the presence of Jesus also asks something of us. This morning the focus statement is: Seeing the child, we respond with all creation in worship and praise. What do you see when you see Jesus?

I invite you to join me in turning to Luke chapter two beginning in verse 1 and together we join Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. Here we read the familiar story of the birth of Jesus. Perhaps like us you heard this story together as a family on Christmas morning. This week during my preparations for this sermon I was reminded while reading from biblical scholar R. Alan Culpepper how

“Each year during the Advent and Christmas seasons, we worry about how we are going to get to Bethlehem this year. (for) Bethlehem is the place where God came to us through the birth of a child. It is a place of mystery and wonder, far removed from the ordinary world in which we live. Angels populate the skies and may appear at any time to shepherds in the fields... Far from the problems of the world, the mother and father hover over their firstborn child lying in the manger. This child will be the Messiah, the Savior for all the earth. Familiar as it is, the Christmas scene often seems to be little more than a fairy tale, a wonderful story that provides a brief escape from the real world we face each day. A meaningful experience of the good news of the season, however, must inevitably involve entering imaginatively into the story, feeling the wonder of God’s grace, and considering the choices that the story puts before us. The first question is, how will we get to Bethlehem?...

At Bethlehem, we also witness the scandal of the Christmas story. Neither the familiarity nor the season’s festivities should prevent us from realizing the scandal that God came into human history completely helpless, as a newborn, and was laid in a feeding trough. Consider in what splendor God might have come, but instead God slipped unobtrusively into a small province far from the seat of earthly power, born to a young couple... No elaborate preparations were made for his birth. God was born on the road. The crib was a feed trough, and those who came to visit were shepherds, not kings. By entering human history in this way, God identified with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, the homeless. Among them, God could do the divine new work. A humility born of need may be the prerequisite for entry into this new kingdom.”ⁱⁱ

The story of Christmas is one that beckons us year after year to return to Bethlehem to join the shepherds in crowding in the stable to catch a glimpse of this new baby, the promised Messiah. I can picture us working hard to just catch a glimpse of Jesus, perhaps we might even become aggressive and push each other a little bit in our straining to see Jesus. We have to remind ourselves that this is just not any baby, it is one that was spoken about by the prophet Isaiah, it is one that was desperately longed for by God’s people, it was the long awaited Messiah, the one born to set the people free.

We move now to verse twenty-one where two rituals are combined under the broader heading of Jesus presented in the temple. Following Jewish practice on the eighth day Jesus was circumcised, however, his mother Mary would be considered to be unclean for an additional thirty-three days. At the end of this additional time the mother returned to the temple for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition as an act to remember the Exodus

the firstborn son would also then be consecrated to God. Here in these verses we hear a confirmation of who Jesus is and what he will do as the Messiah.

Perhaps you recall in 2007 a movie came out that followed the journey of two men, both diagnosed with terminal cancer. As they faced what would be their final months on earth they set out for quite an adventure as they sought to cross off items of their bucket lists - you know the list of things they want to do or see before they “kick the bucket”. They had worked at their lists and the movie traveled with them to each of these destinations and experiences such as skydiving, driving a mustang, seeing the Taj Mahal, and more. The thought was that when they had crossed off all of their items on their bucket list that they will be ready to die. This movie sparked many people across the country to create their own bucket list, and some of you maybe even created your own bucket lists.

Well here in Luke chapter two we meet an elderly man who too had created a bucket list of things he wanted or needed to do before he died. However, unlike the movie characters of Carter and Edward, Simeon’s bucket list apparently only consisted of one item: placing his eyes on the Christ child, the one who is salvation and a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of God’s people. We are told in verse twenty-five that like us he too was waiting for the arrival of Jesus. He would have witnessed many children being brought to the temple as the parents faithfully followed the rituals and religious practices. However, this day was different. Instead of just holding a newborn baby he was holding the king of kings, the Lord of Lords, the promised Messiah. What is key though is that Simeon had his eyes wide open, and was using all of this senses as he was guided by the Holy Spirit and therefore he was able to recognize the treasure that in fact he was seeing and holding.

As Simeon held Jesus he did not comment on his cute little toes, or fuzzy hair. Instead he declared that this child is his salvation, that this child is a light for revelation for the entire world. That this child will cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and he will be spoken against and that through that the hearts of many will be revealed. His words remind us of Mary's provocative words in her song, the Magnificat, in chapter 1. His words remind us of Isaiah's prophecy. His words remind us of what is to come for this dear baby. His words remind us and in some ways point us to Calvary, to the cross, to the empty tomb, to Resurrection Sunday. His words remind us that this child has come to proclaim good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, to proclaim release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, the year of jubilee.

The response to this child then is to offer our profound and heartfelt worship and praise. The appropriate response is not what we normally do with babies to oh and ah and say how cute. Instead it is to fall on our knees, to lay prostrate on the ground, and to worship the Messiah the one that has come to set us free, to flood us with hope, and to lead us all into salvation. First we worship. First we acknowledge the awesome gift of Jesus, sent to us by God out of God's love for the entire world, no exceptions. First we worship the long awaited Messiah, the one we have been making preparations for. However, we then move beyond worship to also praise. Worship can give the false illusion that this is only between me and God. Praise moves us out and beyond ourselves. Praise moves us to bear witness to the arrival of Jesus in our world, both at that first Christmas and every day since. Praise propels us to go tell it on the mountain, to sing joy to the world! And in Luke it is for all people. So not just joy and good news to those who look like us. Joy and good news to those who think like us. Joy and good news only to those who view life like us. No, joy and good news to the world. Salvation made possible for all. Light of revelation

for all. Messiah for all. And so we offer praises to God. We project our praises to all those around us. We join others in proclaiming that Jesus has come and therefore nothing, nothing can ever be the same again. We speak the promise of Jesus to each other and to the world. Jesus has come. This is a game changer. Forever. For you. For me. For the entire world. We worship. We praise. We proclaim.

We proclaim Jesus, the gift that is so freely given, so graciously bestowed, a gift indescribable in its magnitude and significance, a gift we gather to celebrate today. However, as Simeon alludes to in Luke chapter two as our hearts are revealed we reveal if we have fully yielded ourselves to Jesus. We cannot choose to only accept the parts of Jesus and his teachings that we like, those that make us feel warm and fuzzy. There is a temptation to leave Jesus in the manger and oh and ah over the adorable baby and not allow ourselves to fully hear the call to discipleship, the call to peace, the call for inner and outer transformation.

This week I read an advent devotional by another Mennonite Pastor, Megan Ramer. In her reflections she wrote “thank God it isn’t my job to *make* Christ come; I just point to the evidence of Christ’s coming when I see it. And I pay attention when *you* point to it... together (we) bear witness to Christ’s coming into our broken world”^{iv} Today on this Christmas Sunday, what do you see when you see Jesus? Today on this Christmas Sunday what is your response to the arrival of the Messiah, the promised one, the one we have been waiting for? Today on this Christmas Sunday how are you bearing witness to Christ’s coming to our broken world. How are you joining in proclaiming joy to the world the Lord is come! This is very, very, very, very good news! He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found. He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and wonders of his

love. Joy to the world, the Lord is come. May we worship and praise in the presence of Jesus the one who lives, breathes, and walks among us. Thanks be to God!

ⁱ Leader, Fall 2014, 28.

ⁱⁱ R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke: The New Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN), 66-67.

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke: The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, Michigan), 848.

^{iv} <https://themennonite.org/advent-day-19-megan-ramer/>