

Beyond Bethlehem

*A sermon preached by
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Text:

Matthew 2: 1-12

Luke 2: 21-40

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Matthew 2: 1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Luke 2: 21-40

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. **22** When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord **23** (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), **24** and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young

pigeons." **25** Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. **26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. **27** Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, **28** Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, **29** "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; **30** for my eyes have seen your salvation, **31** which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, **32** a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." **33** And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. **34** Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed **35** so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, **37** then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. **38** At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. **39** When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. **40** The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

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Christmas is for the children. It's an old cliché that we get caught up in. I often hear adults claim that they only "do" Christmas because of the children or grandchildren.

And maybe the way we think of our Christmas celebration there's something to that old saying. Brightly wrapped gifts and overwhelming excitement; a sleepless Christmas Eve; visits and letters to Santa and his mall helpers; "visions of sugar plums danced in their heads." Christmas is for the kids.

In some ways, that old saying lets us return to the comfort of our own childhood – for just a little while anyway. And even if our childhood wasn't so great, it sure feels better than the responsibilities and headaches of adulthood. At Christmas we can play with toys. At Christmas we can buy things that we would never otherwise squeeze into our budget. We're allowed to overeat. We're even allowed to get excited by the holiday festivities. We can be kids for at least this one time each year.

But what's to say that adults can't do those things too? Who says we can't have fun just like the kids?

A few years ago, my daughter Lacey asked me take her sledding. On one of my wild slides down the hill, I ran over a younger teenage boy. As we both tumbled to a stop, faces full of snow, my beard dripping with icicles as I laughed out loud. I looked up at this young man who was back on his feet a bit quicker than me – I can't imagine why – and I anticipated him reaching to give me a hand or asking if I was okay. Instead, with a devilish grin on his face he said, "Nice goin' grandpa!" I lay there for a startled second – stunned, certainly not hurt! "Nice going *grandpa* !?!?!?" How old does he think I am? I mean, sheesh, I'm not even a grandpa yet 5 years later – at least for a few more days anyway.

Who says that Christmas (and sledding) is just for children? It's not, you know. Christmas is for all of us and we should never forget that. We must never forget that the child whose birth we

celebrate was born into this world to be present for all – young and old.

We get so wrapped up in the presence of a "baby" in that manger that we tend to forget that there is something there for babies who grow up as well. Sure, we don't have to decorate as much, maybe. We don't have restless Christmas Eve's so much now as adults. We don't get quite as many gifts as we used to perhaps. We might not leave out cookies and milk for the white-bearded guy any more. But Christmas is for us all – young and old.

Look at the people who we encounter after the Bethlehem birth scene in Matthew and Luke. Not a bunch of excited children surrounding the baby in the manger.

The magi – majestic, pomp and circumstance, plodding far and wide with their camels (at least that's how we imagine the story) to see the "king of the Jews." The mystical magi knock on Herod's door and speak of stars and prophesy and destiny. Herod, who we know because we have the privilege of reading the rest of the story, reacts to the magi's visit by ordering the death of all children in and around Bethlehem under two years old. This is not a children's bedtime story, is it? This Christmas is not for children.

And who greets Mary and Joseph and their baby in the Temple in Jerusalem on their first visit. Two "old" people – not little children. They were in the Gospel for last week because they are the first to encounter Jesus beyond Bethlehem – in Jerusalem as his parents presented him in the Temple on day 8. The first is wonderful old Simeon who, prompted by the Spirit, came to the temple always anticipating that he would find the Messiah. Who knows how old he is, but tradition has suggested that he has waited many years and that now he can leave this world with the promise of God fulfilled. He was like a child stuck in a life full of Christmas mornings, looking intently to see if the gift was there yet. He "looked forward to the consolation of Israel," Luke's Gospel tells us. But he was under no illusions about how difficult

the task would be. As he holds the baby he says to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed."

The second elder in the temple is Anna, 84 years old, married early on for only 7 years and a widow ever since. To some of us today that might not seem so ancient, but in 1st Century Palestine that's pretty old. Remember, Mary was perhaps only 14 or 15 when she had Jesus, a common age for women to bear children. I very well could have been a *great*-grandpa in those days. And life expectancy was very short, perhaps I'd be considered a very old (and wise, no doubt!) man.

Old Anna stepped into the story out of nowhere. She spends most of her days at the Temple where she find comfort and care. And as Mary is there with the baby Jesus, Anna "came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel." Both of these elder biblical characters remind us that the Christmas event is not just for the children in our midst.

All of these actors in the Christmas drama beyond Bethlehem are clearly older than anyone we've yet experienced in the story thus far. Anna and Simeon and the magi – old souls who spent their lives thus far searching for the revelation, looking for God wherever God might appear, waiting for the redemption God had promised – the very same promise that has inhabited most all of God children to some degree. Throughout human history, men and women have looked for God's promises to be real and present in some tangible way. Occasionally our waiting has bubbled to the surface and has taken on the form of a distinct longing or hope, but then it fades back into the far recesses of being.

January 6 is the Feast of the Epiphany on the church's calendar – the 12th Day of Christmas, *Dio de los Reyes* in the Latin American world. "Epiphany" means literally "to shine upon," or "to give light" or "to appear ." Thus the ancient blessing -- "May

God shine upon you!" or in contemporary interpretation it might be something like "May God *smile* upon your life." Another way to express it might be to say epiphany is when God shows up or appears. That's how we imagine the visit of the magi to the house of Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. They find what they were searching for and God shines upon them.

The same for Anna and Simeon. They lived in the very real and perpetual presence of this promise. They knew that God's promise would be realized. They knew that God's redemption would eventually be right in front of them. So they waited patiently. Their long lives were devoted to trying to recognize God's presence and so they lived their lives expecting God's faithfulness to be clearly revealed. These faithful elders, living on the margins of society, seemingly out of touch with the world, knew far more about it than those whose days were spent trying to harness the world's power – financial, political and militaristic, human power. These two were at the spiritual center of their universe waiting for God to be revealed.

They waited patiently for God to smile upon them.

Most of our Advent into Christmas message has been about the wait and the patience required. Now we've made it through another Christmas celebration and we are moving beyond Bethlehem. We've sung the familiar carols, heard and watched the stories connected with the season, reminded ourselves of the original story of the birth of Jesus – the stable, the baby, a tender mother, a faithful father, the down-to-earth shepherds.

And unlike us these people seem to have been blessed with immeasurable patience. Mary and Joseph, with great patience in God and each other and those around them, accepted the promise of new birth, the long and difficult journey to Bethlehem with Mary ready to pop at any moment, giving birth in a stable with no assistance, a strange visit from shepherd boys coming for who knows what. All the characters in the story seem willing to receive this great gift with patience.

We're not so patient and we accept that as reality. We want things done yesterday. We want to click a computer key and have the world at our fingertips. We want fast food and 1,000 TV channels. We want service before we even sit down at the table. We live in a world that implies that there are instant answers to difficult questions. Everywhere we look we see the demand for quick results. Our more evangelical and conservative Christian brothers and sisters often preach a Gospel which promises that there is an answer to everything under the sun and beyond simply by reading the words printed on the pages of our Bible. But there is simply no quick fix, there are no solid answers.

Sometimes we think of our Christian faith as instant peace and as a quick answer to the problems that plague us. However, the biblical story talks of no easy answers and certainly no quick solutions. The story tells us of the long preparation of the prophets, the gradual revelation of God to humanity, the plodding visit of the tedious star-gazing magi, the patient waiting of people like Simeon and Anna who are ready to receive God's gifts.

Many people before us have waited patiently for the coming of a messiah. Prophets of many ages waited in a metaphorical darkness, waited for deliverance from God, waited for guidance and comfort, waited for true peace to be revealed, waited for salvation, waited to see the loving face of God.

These beyond Bethlehem characters represent for us the waiting of generations of people who finally when the Christ arrives bring gifts or break into praise and joy in the Temple.

These are the wise ones in the story. These are the people who know that God's coming—that very thing so long awaited and hoped for—cannot help but upset all existing claims to power, and thus lead to the fall of many. The power structure is threatened by the presence of God in this tiny baby. It's what sets off Herod into this terrible retributive act of slaughter. "The inner thoughts of many will be revealed," Simeon tells Mary, "and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

God has been revealed. God is with us. Things will never be the same. The world as it has been known will be turned completely opposite. Simeon and Anna represent the religious and social context into which Jesus comes. Jesus did not enter a vacuum when he was born into our world. He came into a world filled with powerbrokers and cynics and doubters. He came into a world much like our very own. But this story reminds us that then – and now – not everybody ignored what God was doing through this newborn. Anna and Simeon were there waiting – patiently.

The name "Anna" suggests the Hebrew word for "the poor" – *anawim*. These were the outcast in society, those who cannot afford to make it based on what society says you need to live. The *anawim* are in many ways the street people of biblical times – those pushed aside and ignored simply because they have no means to live in the middle class suburbs or even the worst parts of any metropolitan area. Being an old widow, Anna is marginalized and socially written-off. She is the type of person whose only life is in the Temple. It is her home because she has no where else to go.

The meeting of Anna and the newborn baby announces an important theme in Luke's gospel. Jesus is good news to the poor. The needy, the poor, the outcast, those on the margins of this world are the most open and least resistant to the message of God's newness. In Luke it is the devout poor who continue to hope and receive God's new presence. They are contrasted with the full, powerful, successful ones who experience Jesus mainly as a threat. Anna's response is to offer all that she is able to offer – her thanksgiving. She understands what the pious will later discern; that in the poor man of Nazareth has come the Redemption – the Rescuer – of Jerusalem.

Simeon's devotion represents the readiness of some in the world. He hopes, he anticipates, he expects, he waits, "looking forward to the consolation (the comfort) of Israel". He and those like him were looking for the end of exile and the displacement

from their true home that had long been the mark of his people. He truly believed that things need not, and would not, stay the way they were. Sooner or later, he knew there would be a new future that would override the present despair. His hope seems to be for anything that would bring this about – maybe political triumph, maybe the coming of the Messiah.

It is also clear that Simeon's hope isn't enough on its own. A new baby wasn't going to bring about the upheaval of the world; an infant wouldn't cause a political revolution that would turn things around. The other factor in Simeon's readiness is that he experiences the presence of the Spirit of God. Three times it is the Spirit who opens Simeon so that the shape of his hope is broken and his awareness is transformed. He continues to hope, but he is led by the Spirit to see that the correct hope is not like anything that he had thought it would be. Simeon was open to new revelations – and he received from God a clear message that God would be doing new things in the world. And he knew that somehow this baby had the key to God's newness.

Simeon is genuinely surprised and profoundly moved by what is given in this new child. How did he make a connection between this baby he holds in his arms and the great hopes of salvation about which he speaks? How did he recognize who this was? The answer given by Luke is that it was by the Spirit of God.

In his book *The Hungering Dark*, one of my favorite authors Frederick Buechner tells of an experience that he had many years ago when attending a mass at St. Peter's in Rome on Christmas Eve. When Pope Pius XII processed down the aisle of the great Cathedral, he peered into the crowd with extraordinary intensity:

Through the thick lenses of his glasses his eyes were larger than life, and he peered into my face and into all the faces around me and behind me with a look so keen and so charged that I could not escape the feeling that he must be looking for someone in particular. He was not a potentate nodding and smiling to acknowledge the

enthusiasm of the multitudes. He was a man whose face seemed gray with waiting, whose eyes seemed huge and exhausted with searching, for someone, some one, who he thought might be there that night or any night, anywhere, but whom he had never found, and yet he kept looking. Face after face he searched for the face that he knew he would know—was it this one? Was it this one? Or this one?—and then he passed on out of my sight. It was a powerful moment for me, a moment that many other things have crystallized about since, and I felt that I knew whom he was looking for. I felt that anyone else who was really watching must also have known.

Imagine the magi or Simeon and Anna with that same intense look, searching for the consolation and the redemption – the comfort and rescue – of Israel. Day after day, searching for the one who was promised.

As we continue on our journey now beyond Bethlehem, we need to keep in mind these early encounters with the baby Jesus. Waiting for a promise to be fulfilled, searching high and low for God's redemption, waiting in patience and preparing for something new in their lives. They searched and waited they waited for God to break in and make a difference. And God did. And what they discovered – and we need to discover – is that what God gives is always a surprise. It's a surprise for young and old alike. Christmas is not just for the children.

Amen.