



*“What are you waiting for?
A Vision of Hope”*



Luke 2:25-38

November 28, 2021

Perhaps you've heard that there is a war on Christmas. Santa set up crowding out Nativity scenes in department stores. Blaring secular songs replacing the beloved carols of the Christmas season. The celebration of this one unique *holy* day upended by generic greetings in recognition of nondescript seasons. I think I understand the frustration, but I also worry that we've misidentified the threat. From my vantage point as a Christian pastor, Christmas seems to be holding up quite well. Advent, on the other hand, is under attack. Ask most folks when the Christmas season begins, and you're likely to hear something like: "As soon as the turkey is gone." Or, "As soon as the sales begin." Or perhaps, "When the calendar turns to December." After all, Christmas follows Thanksgiving, as every preschool classroom bulletin board and grocery store display clearly communicates.

Advent, the season of the church year that begins today and takes us to Christmas Eve, is under attack. There's a war on Advent, but it's kind of like a cold war because the tactic is total disregard, refusal to acknowledge the season's existence. If we ignore it, maybe it will go away. Yes, Advent is under attack, and it's not hard to understand why. Advent is the season of waiting. That's a tough sell any time—but particularly in 2021—for we have had more than enough waiting this year. We can be forgiven a little impatience. The restless rush to Christmas joy and light and celebration is understandable. We somehow know we need Christmas this year, and Advent just gets in our way. After all, waiting is not the *thing*. Waiting is the time *before* the thing. Waiting must be endured but certainly should not be celebrated.

I want to fight back on behalf of Advent this year.

Now, before you suspect me of being one of those church curmudgeons raining on the Santa at the end of the Thanksgiving Day Parade, hear me out. What if waiting is itself a gift? What if the season of Advent is the only path to a joyful Christmas morning?

Believe it or not, that's precisely the message the Church proclaims year after year—not that we should cancel Christmas, but that we should savor the waiting that precedes it. The billboard on the side of the mountain road in North Carolina last week asked me the question in bold letters against a white background, "Are you prepared to meet Jesus?" That's the question of the Advent season. And these four weeks give us a gift. They slow us down, offering time to prepare. How often do you reach that holy day, that joyful Christmas morning, and find yourself wondering where all the time went? That clock starts today, and we still have the opportunity to do it differently this year. To wait on purpose. *To wait on purpose*. To consider the question that forms our focus this Advent Season: What are you waiting for?

It is Advent, and for those of us inclined to fight back, it's time to wait.

This morning, the Gospel of Luke gives us some role models for the Advent journey. Now let me be clear, these folks do not appear in any Christmas pageant. You will not find them there. They don't appear in those Nativity scene displays. In fact, it's possible that you've never heard of them. But they have something important and instructive to offer us. We begin the season of waiting with two faithful elderly characters named Simeon and Anna. Now,

the timing of this might surprise you because these characters appear *after* the birth of Jesus. But this morning I'm thinking of the waiting that preceded that moment Luke describes in the temple. The Gospel writer's careful introduction of each sets the scene. First, there is Simeon. For many years, this man of God has patiently and expectantly waited for what Luke calls the consolation of Israel. He believes a promise whose memory has faded with the passage of years—a promise that he would not die until he had met the Messiah. Now we don't know how old Simeon is in this moment, but we do know he is contemplating his own mortality, struggling to wait just a little longer for God's redemption so that his life can end in peace. Then, there is Anna the prophet. Married as a young girl for seven years, she was widowed. Now, many decades later as an elderly woman of 84 years, Anna has become the consummate church lady, in the building whenever the lights are on. She never leaves the temple. She's there in that sacred space waiting, and praying, and fasting, and hoping, and dreaming, and wondering.

So here, at the beginning of a story that's all about the birth of a baby and everything becoming new again, there are these old people who know the stories and sing the songs and remember the promises. And when Christmas finally arrives at the temple in Jerusalem, these pillars of the faith are ready for it. The decades of waiting have not been spent in vain. They have been an exercise in patience for the joy that is to come. As Luke tells this story, the waiting is not something we should avoid or overcome or rush past on our way to the *real thing*. The waiting is essential if the gift is to be received.

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Anna and Simeon have something to tell us about redemption. It is not immediate. It is the work of a lifetime. And the fulfillment of God's promise is made that much sweeter by the waiting. Simeon and Anna welcome the gift with hearts made grateful by the process of patient preparation.

This makes these two ancient disciples powerful but

uncomfortable models for us in this season. Waiting is difficult for most of us. But the message of this day is this: Waiting is a tool God uses to shape us. Simeon spent his entire life waiting with a hope in God, and God responded beyond his wildest dreams. Anna lived a life of devotion and expectation, and finally the Holy Spirit spoke to her and through her. *Waiting on God will stretch us* to discover a new depth of hope.

If hope is what you are waiting for today, this week, this year, this season, then consider the words of the Apostle Paul who wrote to the Romans that hope that is seen—that's not hope at all! We do not hope for what we already have. Hope comes from beyond our faculties and capacities. Hope is not manufactured. In this Advent season, our hope rests not on what we can see, but on what lies beyond our vision. Hope rests not on what we can comprehend, but on that which lies outside our understanding. Hope, then, is not passive. It is an intentional act of the will. Hope relies fully on the power of God. Hope relies fully on the goodness of God. Hope does not negate the reality of suffering or carry us above the pain. Advent hope is well versed in sorrow. Advent hope is immersed in heartbreak. Think of Simeon. Think of Anna. These two have spent long years with no answer to their deepest prayer. They have experienced more than their share of disappointment and frustration. Think of Mary, who brings her infant child to the temple to be blessed and, even in this time of great joy, must hear these words: Your son is destined to be opposed. Your own heart will break. The joy of the Christmas season already punctuated by impending sorrow. The second verse of the Christmas Carol "What Child Is This" does not spare us the truth: "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you; hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary."

The words may be difficult to hear, but they also hold our greatest hope—that the infant whose parents took him to the temple to be blessed by God is God's greatest blessing to all the world. The tender complexity of that reality is, for me, embodied in Simeon's action. Before speaking a word, this elderly

man takes the baby in his arms. He cradles Jesus as he shares these hard words. The scene communicates the interweaving of gratitude and grief so beautifully. This, I believe, is where hope is found: the intersection of gratitude and grief. The old man who sees in the infant's face the beauty *and* the pain of what lies ahead. You see, Simeon will not be there to witness the story as it unfolds. He is dismissed from this life in peace, but he has held the promise of God in his human hands. And so he leaves this life filled with a hope strong enough to overcome the deepest despair.

Miss Lena never missed the annual Christmas caroling in the neighborhoods near Vandalia Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina. In fact, Miss Lena never missed anything that happened at that church. In her 80 years, not one person could remember a time when she had been absent from worship on Sunday morning or a youth car wash on Saturday afternoon or a fellowship dinner on Wednesday night. Certainly not the Christmas caroling, for which Miss Lena always provided her impossibly delicious, world-famous pound cake.

But this year had been different. Her beloved husband of 58 years, Edmund, had died at the beginning of December, and we were all concerned about Miss Lena. In the weeks that followed, she seemed somehow suddenly frail and fragile in a way she had never seemed before. And then, the morning of the carol sing, the phone call came. Miss Lena just wasn't feeling too well. She would need to skip the singing this year. When we gathered that evening, there was a sadness hovering in the group, even as we sang "Joy to the World" to our neighbors. We were missing Miss Lena, and we knew how deeply she was grieving.

As we left the Village Green retirement home and prepared to return to the church for cookies, hot chocolate, apple cider, and not pound cake, my younger sister, Emily, had an idea: If Miss Lena couldn't come sing with us, we should go sing to Miss Lena. The adults in the group were united in opposition to the idea. They didn't want to impose

or be a bother. We hadn't called ahead. Who knows what we might find when we arrived. We don't want to embarrass her. But nine-year-old Emily was absolutely insistent, and strategically she rallied a dozen kids to her side. Before we knew it, we were on our way to Miss Lena's house, caravan style. When we arrived, she walked out the front door onto the screened porch where she met us. She welcomed us with tears in her eyes and opened the door wide as we formed a semi-circle around the couch where she sat. All these years later, I remember it so well. Miss Lena cried through every note of every song. She wept there in her living room openly, without a shred of self-consciousness or shame. And many of us wept as well. The promise of Christmas, that this baby born in a barn will finally defeat the power of death and the sting of grief, was a palpable presence among us that night. We trusted that the hope we find in Jesus does not ask us to pretend the pain is not real, does not demand that we rush to the manger. No, our hope is found in the tenderness of vulnerable love. The elderly hands of Simeon hold the helpless baby. The grieving woman rests her hand on the teenage boy's shoulder, singing Silent Night as tears fall. Hope holds us firm in the real world, where our lives and God's life are intertwined, and where love and peace and joy are intermingled with pain and sadness and loss.

This Advent, let Simeon and Anna—and Lena—lead your way. Let go right now of your need to rush to the end. Release the desire to control, hurry, and worry. Instead, just wait. Just linger. Just trust. Just hope. Just watch as the wonder of this sacred season changes you. Amen.