

“What Now?” Simeon and Anna
First Sunday After Christmas
Text: Luke 2:21-40



Reflection Questions for Personal Use or in a Group Context... (please consider the teaching notes prior to consideration of the reflection questions)

“Have you been privileged to have any Simeons or Annas in your life? People that you considered to be examples of faith? Share a story with the group.

“Are there promises onto which you are holding? Are there promises that God has already allowed you to hold? What are the indicators that you are still holding onto hope?”

“Are you able to identify an incident or meeting which seemed to be fairly ordinary but turned into a ‘holy moment’? How were you able to recognize God in that moment? How were you compelled to respond, as a result?”

“Lord, where are you at work around me, today? Where are you at work within me? Where are the places in which you are at work and I have failed to notice? Where are you at work in the places I failed to anticipate?”

“Where, in your life, do you need to see the Lord’s salvation? Where in your life do you see signs of your own self-improvement strategies? How’s that working for you? What strategies/approaches must you confront and reject in order to realize salvation? What values and practices must you embrace in order participate in God’s saving work?”

“What rhythms have you established which make you consistently present to and present for God? Do they seem old and tired or ancient and proven? How might you discover new life in your faith practices?”

Teaching Notes...

The Advent story is a mass of paradoxes and contradictions--- just like our lives.

The story is so unbelievable, yet it just seems to incite belief. The scenes are so fantastic and ordinary, all at the same time. Sometimes you are left feeling so confident, so assured. Other times, you wrestle with almost debilitating bouts of doubt and pessimism. How could a story like this “not” involve hope and fear?

It might actually surprise you to discover that the stories of Jesus’ birth were not of major importance to the early Christians. Neither Mark nor John even record the event (Mark begins his gospel with Jesus as an adult. John introduces Jesus as the, “*Word become human, making his home with us*” (1:14).

The ancients never seemed to get stuck on the issue of factuality. A focus on substantiating the “facts” is not only pointless, but a distraction from the real question: “*What does all of this mean?*”

I don’t think “belief in God” is our biggest issue. It’s “believing in God” that seems to provide the perennial challenge.

I’ve never really struggled with the existence of God. I don’t know that I’ve ever really experienced any type of existential crisis where I walked out the door and wondered where I was or who I was. What has proven problematic, at times, is the promise of “God with us”. That has, most often, proven comforting and, at times, it has sent me into a theological tailspin.

Advent always seems to bring us “full-circle”.

The further along you are on the journey with Jesus, you realize that if your faith is to survive, it must come **“full circle”**.

It is initiated with a **simplicity** (naivete), which allows us to entertain the God-possibilities for our lives. We have no illusions about our inability to ‘regain control’ of our lives, so we are ready to trust, not just anything else, but something else (someone else).

At some point, we will run head-on into something which challenges such a simplicity; which fails to satisfy our need for clarity (e.g. a tragic death, the unexpected breech of a relationship, debilitating doubt, etc.) and life gets **complex**.

If we are to stay on this way with Jesus, our faith must return to **simplicity**. It is somehow a simplicity which is not quite as naïve, but is more hopeful. It is more mature. It is humble. It is a faith that has been challenged and survived. It is not as demanding, of God or one another. A healthy dose of mystery is what’s required to maintain hope.

I’m a bit of a pragmatist, so I’m appreciative that the Advent stories end without a lot of “fanfare”. It’s a perfect segue into life, “*post-Christmas*”. The angels returned to heaven (where they belong), the shepherds went back to work, and Joseph and Mary go about the ordinary business of raising the Messiah (?)

Advent requires stories like this one to help ensure that we continue to develop an ‘earthy’ faith. With so many dramatic and fantastic scenes, it would be easy to assume that this is the “stuff of faith”.

Every time we ground our relationship to God in the miraculous (fantastic; exceptional), we forfeit the capacity to live ‘by faith’, because nothing about our life really requires it.

This season reminds us that there is a danger of only being able to identify God in the spectacular displays. Sometimes we become dependent upon it for validation of our faith. It becomes an “if/then” proposition with God. Sometimes our dependence upon ‘signs’ often evidences a lack of belief, not a vigorous trust.

The sensational, life-altering encounter with God cannot be dismissed, but it doesn’t appear normative. It’s never proven enough to evoke a commitment from us.

This is a post-Christmas story. This is a story of faithful people being faithful amidst all of life’s complexities.

People who were convinced, that in some profound way, the events they had experienced were somehow signaling a new work that God was doing, in Jesus. Everything had changed. Nothing had changed.

One thing becomes apparent in this brief excerpt from the story: Jesus was birthed into and formed in an orthodox, Jewish culture. They kept the Jewish laws and observed the Jewish festivals (Leviticus 12).

On the eighth day, the male child was circumcised and officially named. His name, “Jesus”, (Hebrew, *Yeshua*) means, “*The Lord is salvation.*” Circumcision was, for every male, a sign of their identification with the Hebrew story.

Simeon and Anna: Nativity’s “Odd Couple”.

Anna (the Temple Lady): Married only (7) years when her husband died. Widowed to the age of (84). She’s held countless children during these ceremonies, presumably none of them her own. She has known her share of hardship [fasting associated with mourning].

The Bible characterizes her as one who never left the temple (hyperbole?) She found solace there. Her hardships drew her to God, in dependence, rather than away from him, in defiance.

Simeon (whose names means ‘hearing’): Simeon has been awaiting the moment when God would return and bring relief to those awaiting the new Moses--- the new Exodus. Taking the child in his arms, he declares, “*Take me now, God. I can die a satisfied man.*”

He is describe as: **righteous** (conduct)--- **devout** (Torah-observant)--- **joyful** (hopefully expectant)--- **Spirit led.**

Righteous and joyful? (not, judgmental and cold) Devout and spirit led? (not, rigid and ritualistic)

I often wonder how words like “righteous” and “devout” got associated with empty ritual and lifeless observance? How did they get disassociated with from the Spirit?

Our continued faithfulness, in the ordinary, both honors the moment and rightly assesses the moment. Continuing to live faithfully--- while we wait--- is the best expression of our participation in the entire Advent narrative.

They are faithful, but not ‘stuck’. Their worship is not mechanical and mindless repetition. Faith is not simply about being able to say, “I’m up at 4:30 every a.m., *grindin’ out some God-reps!*”, but it’s about developing habits which intentionally get God on our schedule.

Your life with Jesus will involve undeniable “suddenly” moments of Spirit-inspired interaction and long stretches of routine faithfulness. Don’t miss the God in either.

I think there are (2) equal and divergent tendencies in the Christian life: **first**, is a resistance to the ordinary. We are unwilling to embrace the holiness of the small, mundane acts of love, work, service, which seem less-than-remarkable.

Second, is the tendency to get ‘stuck’ in the ordinary. We lose the capacity to “behold” (“*take notice, consider, pay attention*”). Our routines provide little margin for the extra-ordinary.

The “sacred” (holy) is what you experience when you become aware that the ordinary “reeks of God”.

“One day, Moses was tending the flock in the wilderness...” Exodus 3. Holy moment.

“One day, Zechariah was serving God in the Temple...” Luke 1. Holy moment.

“That night, angels were staying out in the fields with their flocks...” Luke 2. Holy moment.

The restorative work of God is most effective in the context of the mundane [*lacking excitement*, *of the world*]. It seems that what we call the moments of “visitation” are more often the moments when we simply become ‘aware’.

Finding a sense of sacred rhythm in our lives requires a unique blend of routine and spontaneity.

I just don’t think that there is any substitute for making ourselves habitually present *to* and present *for* God.

Routine: ['custom; established procedure'] No one drifts into meaningful relationships. It's not that you are attempting to orchestrate your own healing and transformation, but you are aware of those places which simply invite a more intentional and focused determination, on your part.

Spontaneity prevents our lives from becoming rigid and predictable. It allows us to encounter God without having to prescribe the particulars of when and how. In fact, I'm convinced that we can only be spontaneous if our lives have some order to them.

I think good faith is cumulative.

It is not the result of a series of dramatic God-events, but the outcome of a stringing together a number of seemingly insignificant expressions of trust which are signaling our willingness to cooperate. Paul calls it "*training ourselves to be godly...*"¹ 1 Timothy 4:7

Spiritual practices (e.g. scripture reading, solitude, community, prayer, fasting, etc.) simply help close the gap between the person that we think we are and the person that we want to become.

"Your salvation has come!"

It is the singular message that dismissed everyone from the Advent scene and invited them to now live in defiance of everything they were trusting for life and embrace the ways of the Kingdom. It would require repentance. It would require faith. It would require obedience, not as dutiful compliance, but as a way of demonstrating that we were surrendered to a new way.

This prayer of Simeon's is referred to as the Nunc Dimittis: "*now you dismiss*". It's a canticle used by many churches as a song for the end of the day (compline).

"Lord, I have remained watchful and alert for what you have been up to in my life and in the lives of those who surround me. I have been looking for places where I could bring your kingdom to bear--- where your will could be done; where you would have me serve righteousness. And now, dismiss your servant (at least for a night or rest)."