

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 9, 2022

Waiting and Working

Luke 2:21-40

A few Sundays ago, I spoke about both the return and the eventual retreat of the Christmas spirit. You've already experienced some of it. Radio stations have changed their tune. Stores have started to pivot to Valentine's Day. You've taken down your decorations, or at least have started to think about doing so. But in the life of the church, we're taking our time, especially since we weren't able to gather for worship last Sunday. Our tree is still here, along with the other greenery. Our nativity set is still displayed on the communion table. The celebration of the coming of God through the birth of Jesus is more than just a block of time on the calendar. It's an event whose meaning and significance has to be continually and patiently unfolded.

Even during an ongoing pandemic, it's natural to experience a certain degree of emotional and psychological letdown after all the hype, hoopla, and high expectations of the past few weeks. We often see the time following Christmas Day and New Year's Day as an opportunity to start coming to grips with reality again. But for followers of Jesus Christ, our journey through Advent and into Christmas should have helped prepare us for this. For us, Christmas Day isn't an end but a beginning. It's the start of the story of the Messiah's arrival in the world, a story that will unfold as we witness Jesus' life and ministry, his suffering and crucifixion, his resurrection and exaltation, and the promise of his coming again.

The *New York Times* once reported that David Storch, a music teacher, borrowed a copy of Handel's "Messiah" from the Brooklyn Public Library. However, due to a clerical error, the transaction wasn't recorded. There were many others who requested the score, and the library staff, unaware that it had been checked out, spent hours searching in vain for it. Eventually Storch returned it. When he placed it on the circulation desk, he was astonished to hear the librarian spontaneously, joyfully, and loudly shout, "The 'Messiah' is here! The 'Messiah' is back!" Every head in the library turned toward the voice. But alas, as the newspaper reported, "A few minutes later everyone went back to work."¹

For many of us, Christmas is like this episode in the library. A loud burst of excitement that the Messiah has come, and then an unspectacular return to the ordinariness of the everyday. I guess it's natural to want to linger in the emotional coziness of the holidays. As Elvis Presley sang, "Oh why can't every day be like Christmas? Why can't this feeling go on endlessly? For if every day would be just like Christmas, What a wonderful world this would be."²

In this morning's Scripture passage from Luke, there's some singing going on, but it's not Elvis. It's old, faithful Simeon, who uses his tune to remind us that Jesus' birth is just the opening scene in God's great plan of redemption. Simeon recognizes what God has set in motion, and he doesn't try to sugarcoat baby Jesus' future. With the infant in his arms, Simeon looks up at Mary and says, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many

hearts will be revealed" (vv. 34-35). According to Simeon, God's salvation is inseparable from God's judgment. He even predicts that a sword will pierce Mary's soul. She too will share in the pain of Jesus' rejection.

How do you picture baby Jesus when he's in Simeon's arms? Perhaps you envision a serene infant, gazing back at Simeon with affectionate eyes. Not so in a painting by the master artist Giotto (1266/7-1337). In his depiction of today's story, Simeon speaks his familiar words, "You now dismiss your servant in peace." All the while, the infant Jesus is responding the way many babies do when held by an eccentric stranger. His small, dark eyes are narrowed and fixed in alarm as he stares at Simeon. He reaches desperately for his mother Mary, trying to escape from this strange old man. And as he reaches away from Simeon and toward Mary, Jesus' body is basically suspended above the Temple altar. As one commentator has put it, "This very human baby is from the beginning, the eternal sacrifice for the redemption of mankind."³

Simeon's purpose isn't to ruin Joseph and Mary's baby dedication service. His purpose is to speak the truth about Jesus, from birth to death, from his first breath to his last. This wise, white-bearded servant of the Lord, holding the Messiah in his arms, is a faithful witness, and his words are a warning to anyone who loves to come to the manger but refuses to go to the cross. So while we praise God for the gift of the Christ child, let's also be prepared to go forward, because no matter how much we like Bethlehem, Calvary is always within sight.

As I've indicated, we can't stay in the emotional cocoon of Christmas forever. We have to remember that the world we live in, lost and broken as it is, belongs to God just as much on December 26 as it does on December 25. Part of what this means is that the Christian life is a life of service in the world, not a life of isolation from the world. The Incarnation itself, God coming among us in Jesus, charts the course, sets the direction, and determines the shape of our own lives.

John Rosen was a psychiatrist in New York City. He was well known for his work with catatonic schizophrenics. In many cases, doctors remain separate and aloof from their patients. But Rosen made it a practice to move into the ward with his patients. He placed his bed among their beds. He lived the life they had to live. Day by day, he shared his life with them. He loved them. If they didn't talk, he didn't talk either. It was as if he understood what was happening. His being there, being with them, communicated something that they hadn't experienced in years, namely, that someone understands. But then Rosen did something else. He puts his arms around them and hugged them. He held these people who were usually viewed as unattractive and unlovable. He loved them back to life. Often, the first words they spoke were simply, "Thank you."

This is what Christ did for us at Christmas. As one person puts it, "He moved into the ward with us. He placed his bed among our beds. Those who were there, those who saw him, touched him and were in turn touched by him and restored to life."⁴

The great Reformer Martin Luther once wrote, "The mystery of the humanity of Christ, that He sunk Himself into our flesh, is beyond all human understanding."⁵ Beyond all human understanding, yes. A mystery, yes. But the mystery speaks with clarity about how much we, and the rest of the world, matter to God. We matter enough for God to give his only Son, who was born in humility and died in the humiliation of the cross for our sins. And yet, the crucifixion and resurrection are the event through which God acted to redeem the world. So while we wait for the coming of the risen Lord, we take seriously our responsibility to be at work in this world where God has placed us.

Simeon and Anna knew what it was like to work, worship, and wait. For years and years, they had prayed, praised, and prepared. They spent their lives performing acts of mercy and justice. They were on the lookout for the coming of God. They didn't keep watch by withdrawing from the world and disconnecting themselves from the life of God's people. On the contrary, they waited for God by plunging into the worship, work, and witness of God's covenant community. And they did so not to pass the time, but to redeem the time. To use the time they were given. This was the way to live expectantly. This was the way to live on tiptoe, anticipating the arrival of God's salvation. You see, their entire existence was shaped by hope, by what they were waiting for.

Then one day, two new parents carrying a pair of birds and a baby barely a week old came walking into the house of the Lord. Most of the worshipers probably didn't recognize what was going on. But Simeon and Anna knew. They knew because they had faithfully listened to and walked by the Holy Spirit. And the Spirit wasn't about to let them down now. The Spirit told them that now was the time, this was the place, and that was the baby. This child was what they had spent their entire lives waiting for. God had finally come.

Now that we're on this side of Christmas, I pray that we'll continue to do what we're called to do every day of the year—wait and work. We've staked our lives on God's promise to complete the work that he has started through Christ. So we live forward, looking toward that day when Christ will come again and the fullness of God's reign will be revealed. Between now and then, we're given life one day at a time. So I pray that we'll live with expectant faithfulness. Like Simeon and Anna, let's live lives of devotion, so that we'll be sensitive to the presence of God in the events, relationships, and tasks of our daily lives. Waiting on God can be an extremely hard thing, but I pray that he'll give you eyes to see when and how he comes to you, especially in the ordinary, the daily, and the routine.

And waiting for the Lord is inseparable from working for the Lord. They're two sides of the same coin. So keep your focus on Christ, and press on in the work of Christ. Remember that you're participating in God's mission, God's kingdom project, for God's glory. Educator and theologian Howard Thurman wrote a poem titled, "The Work of Christmas." He says:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
 When the star in the sky is gone,
 When the kings and princes are home,
 When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
 The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost, to heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry, to release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people,
 To make music in the heart.

Another Christmas may have come and gone, but the work of God continues. And so does our waiting, and our work.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima: CSS, 1987) 47.

² Lyrics by Red West.

³ John W. Dixon, Jr., quoted in Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima, Ohio: CSS, 1987) 50.

⁴ Mark Berg in Donald L. Deffner, *Seasonal Illustrations, Resource*, 1992, 21.

⁵ Martin Luther, *Table Talk*.