

“She Showed Up”
Sermon at Brown Memorial Park Ave.
December 31, 2017

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for she has clothed me with the garments of salvation, she has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Luke 2:22-40

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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” 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, 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. 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. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to

Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

In September, I sat down to look at the remainder of my 2017 calendar. At the top of today, I scrawled, “Preach...” “Where are you preaching?” my friend asked. “I don’t know,” I told him. “But the Sunday after Christmas is New Year’s Eve, so, I’ll be in a robe somewhere.”

I’ve preached on this Sunday for the last four years, and have come to love it dearly. It’s a reminder that the waiting we did in Advent was leading to something. And it gives us one more week to sing Christmas hymns, to celebrate this wonderful and absurd promise fulfilled that God moved in next door.

I also love this Sunday because there is no casual reason to be here this week.

Everybody wants to meet the baby Jesus, but a week later when the shepherds leave, people stay home. I get it. Angels over the fields and a star in the sky are just better pageant material than meeting two octogenarian temple prophets and sacrificing a couple birds. After a week or two with family in town, your house is a mess of laundry piles and wrapping paper. Your guests are either gone or on their way back home soon. And now it’s New Year’s Eve. There are other places to be and other things to do, but you chose to be here. People rarely stumble into worship the Sunday after Christmas.

There are any number of reasons to show up this morning, but the one I have heard quietly offered most frequently over the last four years in the receiving line after worship is a deep and pressing need to hear good news at the end of the year.

It’s been one hell of a year. The annual homicide count in Baltimore will start again at midnight after creeping close to 350. The Gun Violence Archive is reporting 342 mass shootings this year, and 15,000 deaths. This will undoubtedly be remembered as the year sexual harassment and assault became less acceptable, and I want to claim victory, but as domestic violence and abuse hotlines and response centers scramble to hire more counselors, it is clear that this is far from settled.

Surveying the landscape of the loss and fear and upheaval of this year that will no doubt bleed into tomorrow, and on this side of the manger, I know what the good news is supposed to be. Advent, with its apocalypse and its hope laced with anger was pretty clear. God is here. God moved into the neighborhood. God promised to show up, and God showed up.

But first century Palestine feels far away. The manger feels far away. God's swelling up to be among us feels far away. And I wonder, in this moment when finding God here feels increasingly desperate, how on earth I will find God here.

Simeon finds Jesus with help from the Spirit. Luke goes out of his way to tell us that the Holy Spirit rested Simeon. The Spirit rested on him, the Spirit revealed things to him, the Spirit guided him to the Temple that day to find little Jesus with his parents. Simeon saw what God promised, and in an expression of gratitude to God, declared that he could die happy.

While there is plenty of good news to hear from Simeon, I think he takes up enough of the page to get the word across all on his own without much more help from me. Besides, he is a preacher we know, and acts at least a little like a Protestant. He hears good news because he is utterly dependent on the Spirit to show it to him. He is forward and bold. He bursts onto the scene and catches Mary holding the baby, Joseph with two pigeons in his hands. Even as he holds this baby in his arms, even as he sees God's promise fulfilled, he still takes a moment to agitate Mary: "A sword will pierce your own soul too."

I moved to Baltimore seven months ago. Never in my life have I heard so many sermons from so many pulpits that aim to agitate people. And it works.

But below these bold declarations like the one Simeon offers to Mary rests a way of looking for God in the world that we sometimes neglect. Our forefathers fell so in love with Simeon's way of finding God in the world that they forgot about Anna.

As the family stands dumbfounded by this man who's just taken their baby in his arms, Anna walks through. Unlike Simeon, she seems to do it entirely unprompted. She seems to literally stumble into God's work. If I were preaching to Methodists, I would say, "What luck!" But this is a Presbyterian church, where nothing is lucky or by chance, and so instead I ask, "How did she know?" How did she show up at the right place at the exact right moment and recognize what God was doing in front of her?

We never hear Anna speak - Luke doesn't offer any direct quotes. Still, we know more about her than most women in the New Testament who occupy the same small amount of scriptural real estate.

How did she recognize God at work? Being a prophet couldn't have hurt. As a member of the prophetic tradition, she would know the history of her people. She would know the songs and proclamations of Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and so many others. She would have spent time listening to the promises we read in Advent. Having access to tradition and living each day

in ways that remembered and reflected it would have helped her recognize good news as it walked past her.

Then of course there's the reality that people who find Jesus in Luke's first chapters are largely forgotten people, bodies that the 'powers that be' consider expendable, when they consider them at all.

As an 80-year-old widow, Anna falls safely in that category.

If her family adhered to the custom of the day, Anna married young. She was married until her husband died seven years in. And so, from likely her early twenties through her eighties, Anna lived as a widow.

When they surface in scripture, we tend to read widows the same way regardless of any other information we have about them, and often in ways that take away their power. Anna is no exception. We imagine widows are poor and helpless. They are a bother leaders must figure out how to deal with. They are a drain on a shared economy, cast as pitiable victims of circumstance. The most a widow can give the community is a proper shaming for not contributing enough money, and a good teaching moment, a lesson uttered by a man who takes note of her actions and gives words to them. Poor Anna, widowed so young, forced to fend for herself. But look at how well she worships God.

She is a widow, but like most categories of people, not all widows are the same. For instance, though Anna was old, not all widows were old. And not all widows were poor. Under Roman law, women could inherit from their husbands and manage property. Widows were integral members, founding members of early Christian communities. Paul, ridiculous, wordy Paul would have run out of paper to write on if it hadn't been for widows funding his letter sending habit. We forget sometimes I think that they were there, but Luke knew well enough that widows were important members of the church to include a one as one of the first people to recognize Jesus publicly.

Regardless of what kind of widow she was, Anna still walked through the world with a particular kind of vulnerability.

Perhaps she recognizes Jesus because of what she carries with her. There is something about being intimately familiar with unchosen vulnerability that makes hearing God's word as good news a little easier. I don't want to romanticize vulnerability, but God's promises to come back, overthrow tyrants, and build a more just world are really good news if someone is stepping on your neck.

Her status as a widow and her role as a prophet surely helped her find God that day, but it was the last thing Luke tells us about her that illuminates the most important, most difficult, most overlooked, but simple reason Anna knew who Jesus was.

Every day, long before Jesus was born and brought to the Temple, Anna sought God. Every day, through fasting and praying and worshipping, she was formed to see the world around her in particular ways, was formed to be on the lookout for God's action around her. And so when God worked in front of her, she knew it immediately. Anna, for sixty years, showed up. For sixty years, Anna was in the Temple, was in the place where God and others and tradition all said God would be. For sixty years, Anna showed up.

She knew that we find God at work when we decide to show up to see God at work. To show up everyday for decades if need be - with expectation. To show up not just when the Wind stirs us or when a sermon inspires us or a newspaper headline convicts us, but to show up every single day regardless.

That day, a thousand things were competing for her attention. Surely, Jesus wasn't the only baby there. Animals were brought in and out of the walls. People tired from travel gathered. And Temple was under construction. Anna had a thousand reasons to stay in bed that morning. She was tired. She'd waited and watched long enough.

Anna's world is far from ours in time and space, and still, a thousand things compete for our attention. And a thousand reasons to stay home surface. But the work of finding God and joining in are well underway in our city. Many of you are already standing shoulder to shoulder with others who are looking for the ways that God is turning the world upside-down. And many of you are staring into the abyss of gun violence statistics, wealth inequality, corruption, schools with lead pipes, staggering unemployment numbers, drug crises, wondering how to find God anywhere even as you know that finding God at work is our best hope.

It is overwhelming. But it is simple. Anna's life and Temple encounter tell us that we will never find God at work in our city unless we show up. Not because God will show up once we prove we can show up, but because God is already there, waiting for us to notice.

How do we find God and hear good news?

Sometimes the Spirit stirs us to action in a particular moment to be in the right place and at the right time. Simeon assures us of that. But Anna reminds us that often, finding God is utterly ordinary, is an event without fanfare, is marked by God's quiet surfacing, a moment so

inconsequential against the backdrop of the world around it that we would miss it if we hadn't been there before to notice anything had changed. Anna knew that we find God because we show up, persistently and consistently in the places where God said She would be.

And so we go.