

# Waiting for God

sermon digest

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Luke 2:22-39

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Luke began and concluded his Gospel in the Temple. The story opens in the Temple with the angelic revelation to the priest Zechariah. The story ends with the final words of Luke after the Ascension; the disciples were, "continually in the temple blessing God." The Temple was not only the liturgical center of worship and hope for Israel, it was a symbol for the continuity between the old and the new. The Temple was the location for the inseparable bond between Jesus and Israel, our Old Testament and New Testament. So, the first act after the shepherds return to their fields and the eighth day rite of circumcision finds Mary and Joseph in the Temple with their newborn son. They were faithful Jews following regulations that required a rite of purification for the mother forty days after the birth of a son (eighty days for a daughter) and the dedication of the firstborn son to God.

**Christmas includes elders.** Carl Vasta wrote the lyrics, "Christmas is for children, that's what people say/ All their smiles are brighter because of Christmas day." Whether or not intended, the song reinforces the popular notion that Christmas is an exclusive children's party. We should not ignore the original Christmas story of Luke. Not only does the story begin with old Zechariah and Elizabeth, after the birth of Jesus two senior adults take center stage in the presentation of the baby in the Temple. Simeon is a devout old man living toward the promise of seeing the Messiah with his own eyes. He is near to God both in spiritual life and proximity to death. According to Luke, the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would see the Lord's Messiah, so Simeon arrives at the Temple at just the right time to encounter the Holy family. Anna is identified by Luke as a "prophet." Since the death of her husband of seven years, she had lived to the ripe old age of 84. She had been in the Temple day and night living on a steady diet of worship and fasting.

Luke is telling us something important about the connection of Jesus to history. Raymond Brown associates the two elders with the Law and the Prophets, two segments of Jewish scriptures carefully preserved, copied, and handed down for succeeding generations. To be sure, the child is a gift of hope toward the future, and Simeon's oracle speaks of a future destiny for Israel, a sign of opposition, and a sword piercing the parent's soul. But time flows like a river out of the springs of the past. Two witnesses from the retiring generation represent the fulfillment of hope from the history that had led to this moment. The Law and the Prophets from the past rise up and bless the child of the future. History can never be recovered, can never be changed, but it can be fulfilled. The new page that turned with the birth of Jesus is just that, a new page in the continuing story of the Covenant of God.

Simeon and Anna, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, are old folks, who belong to the story. Although most of their lives are past and gone, they represent more than a dead past. They bring the vision and hope of history into the present. They bring into focus the whole picture of God's saving grace. The old folks have lived out their lives in pregnancy, in expectation that God is not done with the world. They have lived their lives waiting for God's light to break into the darkness of their world. Their piety was translated into active waiting. The open eyes of their spiritual insight gave clarity of vision to recognize the hope of the world, and they were there to bless the future. Perhaps there is a purpose even in waiting.

**Waiting can lead to despair.** The British sitcom "Waiting for God" ran in England from 1990-1994 and continues to appear periodically on PBS. The comedy follows the antics of two resourceful senior adults consigned to life in a retirement home under the expectation of both family and administration that they should "act their age," but Diana and Tom consistently exhibit a youthful spirit of resistance to authority. The title "Waiting for God" is hardly a statement of piety. Diana and Tom are quite irreverent, and waiting does not fit with their spirited impatience with conventional behavior. The title may be a play on Samuel Beckett's cynical play "Waiting for Godot," sometimes known as theater of the absurd. Within the frame of comedy, the TV show is a social protest against the rocking-chair image of senior life. Diana and Tom spend their days doing anything but waiting for God. Their days are occupied with war on institutional regulations and injecting fun and excitement into the programmed boredom of life in a retirement home.

I was introduced to "Waiting for God" by our friend Betty Galloway more than a decade ago. For

some strange reason, I have a greater appreciation for the senior rebels today than I had then. I think that we can say it out loud; *waiting for God* both in the TV comedy and in Beckett's absurd drama is code for waiting for the end, waiting for death. The theater of the absurd offers nothing but futility at the end. In Beckett's play, Godot never appears. Life moves toward a vacuum of despair. So, to keep from crying, you might try laughter. You can defy the end with Diana and Tom. You can go out with a smile on your face and big splash in the social scene. You can guarantee that you will be missed by family and friends and certainly by your keepers even if the primary emotion of the people who miss you is relief that you are gone.

Several years ago, I was surprised to learn that one of those opinion polls that determine the way we do business, politics, and fashion uncovered a shocking level of nihilism among the elderly. Conventional wisdom suggests that strong religious faith is found more among people at the end of life than at any other stage. According to the poll, not so! The battle with health problems, limited mobility, and a sense of declining personal worth was found to have infected many senior adults with a cynical view of God and religion.

My maternal grandmother lived to the age of 99, and all of my life she seemed very old. All of my life, she was the spiritual matriarch of the family, a student of the Bible and a model of a rock solid foundation in faith. I learned from her experience in years. Like all of our attitudes toward life, faith is shaped from the inner self as well as by external events. All of us are waiting for God at various distances from the end. Life is not over until it is over. While we wait for God, we have some choice in how we wait. We can allow loss to rule our view of the future, or we can meet our loss with trust in the God who has created us to grow, even to grow old.

***Elders provide hope and blessing for tomorrow.*** I shall never forget my last visit with Grandmother. She wanted to talk about the end. Why had God allowed her to live so long? Why had her youngest child been taken before her? What was left for someone at her age? These were questions that emerged from a life of hope and trust in God, questions for which I had no simple answers. I still do not believe that platitudes can satisfy the profound questions of faith, but God has given us islands of hope in the sea of despair.

Simeon and Anna provide a ministry of blessing to Mary and Joseph that affected not only the life of the child, but the power of blessing for all of the generations to come. The fourth and final canticle in Luke's birth narrative, the "*Nunc Dimittis*," is offered by Simeon in the Temple as he takes the infant Jesus into his arms. Some believe that the canticle may be an early Christian funeral hymn. Monastic orders have recited Simeon's benediction in night prayers since the fifth century. It is an evening song, more like a liturgical benediction than Zachariah's "*Benedictus*"; but it is neither a sigh of despair from one who was on the threshold of death nor a resignation from life from one who was weary of waiting. Although Simeon had witnessed the high moment of fulfillment for his own personal journey, it is not a "me" song. He had a vision of the consolation of Israel prophesied by Isaiah, but he had also seen the light for revelation to Gentiles, the hope of the entire world.

"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."