

Candlemas 2025

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Scriptures: Malachi 3:1–4; Psalm 84; Hebrews 2:14–18; Luke 2:22–40

“A baby is just what we need.”

That’s what I imagine they thought. No, I am not talking about a mom and a dad ready to expand their family. I am not talking about those wishing that their children would get on with the task of giving them grandchildren. That is the thought I have put together in my imagination of what Simeon and Anna must have said to themselves as they saw the baby Jesus, carried by Mary and Joseph into the Temple, 40 days after his birth.

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I imagine the smile that came across their faces as the realization hit them, not just at the promise of God fulfilled, but in the clever working out of the details that pull the story all together. That same smile we get when we come across the great reveal of a novel or a film that puts every detail in its place - the moment when we find that Mr. Darcy has in fact loved Miss Bennet from the moment he first saw her, the moment we read that Professor Snape has been protecting and advocating for Harry Potter from the very beginning out of love he had for Harry’s mother. These are those “a-ha, everything is coming together” moments.

This is one such moment of dramatic revelation, maybe the greatest of such moments, for Simeon and Anna and for all of us who pay attention through the story of the Scriptures. A moment made all the more powerful by the fact that not only do we read about it, we believe it is actually what happened.

Simeon and Anna would have known of the prophecy we read from the prophet Malachi, that “the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come into his Temple.” This would have likely conjured up images of grandeur and might. Something out of the fiery parts of the prophets - “who can stand at his coming?” the text says.

Both Simeon and Anna had seen a lot of different powers come and go in that very Temple. We can say this about Anna almost assuredly, because the Scriptures give us her age, and I am going to assume the same for Simeon as well, as the text seems to suggest he is near the end of his life. And so it is relevant to both of these characters to say that the century leading up to Jesus’ birth, a century of which Anna had lived 84 years, was one with a lot of changes in that Temple.

Anna would have been alive at the tail end of a brief period of Jewish independence, where God’s people were free of foreign rule for the first time since the Exile. But things weren’t so great by the time Anna and Simeon were around. The new found freedom that began about fifty years before Anna and Simeon were born had crumbled into corruption and infighting. Splinter groups were forming, saying that the ones in power weren’t doing things right and at times, it probably felt like things were barely holding together. Then, when Anna was in her late twenties, Rome came to town. The Roman general Pompey came into the Temple with the Eagle of Rome lifted above his head. Then Rome took advantage of the unstable situation and set up its own puppet leaders, like Herod the Great.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Bird and Wright *The New Testament in its World*, 92-97.

So to sum up. Anna and Simeon had seen all of the following in Jerusalem corrupt and infighting Jewish leadership, pagan rulers, and puppet kings doing' Rome's bidding. Lots of power, lots of weapons, lots of money, lots of strength.

We could see them, watching the Herods, the Hasmoneans, the Pompeys all failing to lead God's people out of darkness, agreeing with the Psalmist:

"Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

Our soul has had more than enough  
of the scorn of those who are at ease,  
of the contempt of the proud."<sup>2</sup>

And then they see a baby and the Holy Spirit tells them - this is the one.

"A baby is just what we need."

Because the God that was coming into his Temple at last was the same God who spoke to the child Samuel in the middle of the night when his fully capable adult priest Eli was sitting right there. The God who was coming into his Temple was the same God who passed over all of his older and more impressive brothers to pick David to lead his people as king. The God who was coming into his Temple that day was the one who is heralded as a lion and yet appears as a slaughtered lamb. As the Apostle Paul writes. "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 123:3-4

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:27

I know I have said something like this multiple times in my preaching, but it is all over the Gospel and here again today, so forgive me for repeating myself, but that basic teaching of Jesus, that the last will be first and the first will be last is blaring from the text long before Jesus ever utters those words. A baby. Revealed to be God. God in his Temple as a baby. Maybe you can see the knowing smile that comes to Simeon's face, to Anna's face. They know the real thing when they see it.

And from the moment that they are aware of Jesus, neither Simeon nor Anna can stop talking about him. They are the lived example of those parables Jesus would later tell of the one who finds a pearl of great value or a treasure buried in a field. Nothing can be more important than this.

As Simeon's song tells us and as Jesus alluded to in our Gospel reading earlier this morning, the time for the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham has come - light to the nations. The world begins again, right here, right now. And it is not just Israel that gets in on the action. God has a much broader scope in view.

I can't help but read this passage and think that I want to be like Simeon and Anna when I grow up. They knew the work of God when they saw it and they got right in line and started working for the kingdom.

So how did they do it? How can we mimic these saints in their faithfulness to God and receive the same fulfillment and joy they received for that faithfulness?

I think the first thing that we have to recognize is the presence of the Holy Spirit in this story. The next time you are reading through Luke's Gospel, note how much talk there is about the work of the Holy Spirit. This comes as little surprise as we know that Luke is also the author of Acts, where the Spirit is the primary actor among the early Christians. But even in his pre-Pentecost volume, Luke is constantly talking about the Holy Spirit - and in specific ways.

Imagine Simeon had missed going to the Temple that day. But he was prompted by the Holy Spirit, not only that he would see the Messiah when he came, but even down to getting to the Temple at the right time. The text tells us that Simeon came in the Spirit into the Temple.

This can make us nervous, and it makes me nervous. I am sure we have all been the recipient of some advice where we were told, "The Holy Spirit told me to tell you," and what followed was anything but the right word. But if we want to be looking for signs of the light shining in the darkness, we have to be open and listening for the prodding and leading of the Holy Spirit. Without listening to the Holy Spirit, Simeon doesn't make it there that day. Are you listening for the voice of the Spirit? Have you asked for the Spirit to speak to you? These are important questions.

Simeon and Anna also had eyes to see and ears to hear the work of God when they encountered it. This was wrought of their faithfulness in prayer, both serving regularly in the Temple. It is also wrought of their understanding of the Scriptures, seeing the Gospel patterns that would point them to a baby when everyone else was expecting for God to enter his Temple as a king.

A gospel-formed imagination allows us to see where God is working and where his power is being made perfect in weakness. A Gospel expectation has us looking toward those groups that Jesus mentioned in his hometown sermon that keeps coming up these past few weeks - the poor, the captives, the blind, the oppressed.

Our imagination forms what we see. One of the struggles throughout the Gospels for the Apostles is the idea that Jesus had come to overthrow Rome in some sort of violent revolution. There is even a hint that some of them still thought this would occur after his death and resurrection (Acts 1:6). This was not a problem for Simeon and Anna. Their prophetic imaginations could handle a weak baby being their Lord. And I am sure it would be no surprise to them, though they would have passed away before it occurred, to see Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. May God give us an imagination like theirs.

Finally, I see a steadfast pursuit in each of these two heroes of Candlemas, a desire for nothing greater than seeing God's kingdom come to Earth. Simeon had been promised that he would see the Messiah and that promise was all he needed to live a life of purpose and fulfillment. We don't see him complaining of the hazards of old age or longing for times gone by, we just see him rejoicing at the end of his life in the one thing that mattered - seeing Jesus.

Anna certainly had the right to complain - of the financial instability that came with being a long term widow, of the loneliness that accompanied the same. But that is not what she did. She dedicated herself to the things of God, and was in the Temple daily for six decades, praying and fasting.

You couldn't tell Simeon and Anna that anything was more important than God's plan for his people. Not their own sufferings, not the ever-changing society and politics of their day,

nothing but God's work in the world. It is a great encouragement to me to see two faithful saints at the end of their days not growing more bitter with the amassed sufferings of a long life, but ever more giddy and child-like as they see the good God is doing. Thank God that Simeon and Anna finished their races well. They were rewarded with seeing Jesus. Are we content, joyous with Jesus as our true reward? I am ashamed to say there are days when I am not. I want the more tangible, more immediate stuff. I am sure Simeon and Anna had those days too. But this day we find them in the Temple was one of their good days, a good day made possible by continual faithfulness throughout their lives.

So as we take the light of the Gospel to the nations, processing here in just a few minutes around this space with candles, taking the goodness that is here out with us into the world in our daily lives, let us remember to ask for the leading of the Holy Spirit, the eyes and ears to recognize where Jesus is at work, and the firm resolve to accept nothing less than him to the end of our days.

Simeon and Anna received and welcomed the Light with glad and full hearts. May we all do the same.