

A MATTER OF TIME
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Luke 2:25-38
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First Presbyterian Church High Point, NC
Service for the Lord's Day

Swans a-swimming, or maids a-milking. Take your pick. Depending on how you count, today is either the 7th or 8th day of Christmas.¹ Christmas is a season, albeit a short one, lasting twelve days. It has to be said, because it takes some effort to continue to celebrate Christmas into the first few days of January. To follow the Christian calendar means going against the grain. While the rest of the world quickly takes down the decorations and puts Christmas behind them, in the Christian tradition, we mark the season beginning with Christmas Day and ending with Epiphany on January 6th. It is somewhat discouraging to me that in most places, Christianity has given up our traditional liturgical calendar which marks the holidays of the Church in exchange for what basically amounts to the retail calendar. We have bought into it. In fact, I noticed this year that many retailers borrowed the idea of “12 Days of Christmas” to mark the twelve shopping days before Christmas—offering a different deal on each day. Not least among these is one of my favorite Christian booksellers and retailer of Bible studies and the like—a website that I use often called “The Thoughtful Christian”—was less than thoughtful in the use of the 12 Days of Christmas—using that phrase to refer to twelve days of bargains that they offered during the month of December, leading up to Christmas.

For the most part, it seems that the retail cycle has taken over the Advent/Christmas observance. What ought to be a time of somber expectation during Advent has become a time of festive retail frenzy, and what ought to be the celebration of the 12 days of Christmas following the birth of our savior, has now become a time when we put it all behind us, take down our decorations, and, if anything, focus on the turning of the calendar year. How many of us—including me—have asked the question, “Did you have a nice Christmas?”—implying that Christmas is already over.

How we mark time matters, it makes a difference. That’s why I think this is important. It makes a difference how we mark our lives—it affects the meaning we give to the days of our lives. We are creatures who are bound by time. We are so guided and controlled by time, that the way we mark time says something about who we are. Wouldn’t it be better if the time that dictated our lives was time marked by the celebration of the seasons of the Christian year, rather than the retail cycle? Or even the academic calendar or the tax year? Marking our life by the liturgical seasons says that we are first and foremost a Christian, before we are anything else—student, teacher, taxpayer, consumer.

It’s a lot easier to go along with popular culture when it comes to celebrating holidays. Going against the grain of the culture also means going against what seems natural and easier to us—because so much of the Christian liturgical calendar is about something that most of us don’t naturally do well—waiting. Holding off on celebration until the time is right, and then celebrating for more than just a moment. Rather than waiting and then letting the celebration linger, we like to be on the move, quickly turning to the next thing. But the liturgical calendar

¹ There is general agreement that the night of December 25th marks the first night of Christmas, and the night of January 5th, the last. The disagreement has to do with whether the day attached to that night precedes or follows it.

requires us to wait, to move more slowly, to be a little more still than we are used to being. And by being still, of course, we might actually get to know God.

That's what happens in our text today. Simeon and Anna have waited and waited. Both are devout and faithful, and both understand that they are operating on God's time, not on their own schedule. Simeon expects to see the Messiah before he dies, and so he waits. In fact, he has waited for decades. One would think that even one of the ancients might give up after all those years of waiting. But the promise to Simeon comes from God, and he knows that God is faithful. Finally, one day, close to the end of his life, Simeon is led into the Temple by the Holy Spirit—and there he finds Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus who have come to the Temple on the same day. It's a divine appointment. Simeon takes Jesus into his arms, and offers his praise to God. Having now seen the promised Messiah, he has seen what he has been waiting for, and is ready to face death. Meanwhile, Anna, who is a widow, is in the Temple, too—where she stays day and night, worshipping and fasting. She, too, praises God after seeing the child, and begins to tell those around her about him.

It's a beautiful picture—the elderly Simeon, holding this small baby, and Anna nearby, both rejoicing in the salvation provided by God, in the promise and hope for the future. Simeon, Anna, Mary, Joseph, Jesus—this gathering of people reminds us of the church—one of the few places where we are not segregated by age, where young and old gather together to worship God, to serve, and to encourage one another.

The story today doesn't tell us whether Simeon and Anna are grandparents, but they are certainly the age to be grandparents, and like grandparents, they each have a unique perspective. Grandparents hold the history of their families; they are in a unique position in time. If they are fortunate, they have known the two or even three generations that have gone before them, and also the two or even three generations that follow them. A grandparent can hold the knowledge of as many as seven generations of a family! No one else holds as much history—in this way, those who are grandparents have a special relationship to time. They have knowledge of the past, of where they have come from, and they are able to look forward in hope to the future.

So Simeon and Anna are in a unique position. They have lived their long lives waiting to see the salvation of the world. They knew the history of Israel, and they knew the promises of God. They had waited, and they had not given up hope. And prompted by the Holy Spirit, Simeon declares that he has seen what he has waited his entire life to see. But what exactly has he seen? Not much. Just a baby. A baby that, for all intents and purposes, does what any other baby does. Which is not much. Simeon and Anna will be long gone before Jesus begins his work thirty years later. And the world looks the same as it did the day before they saw this baby. Whatever it is that Simeon and Anna see, they see it in the form of hope, of a promise yet to be fulfilled.

In many ways, you and I are in the same position that Simeon and Anna are in. Throughout Advent, we have been expectantly waiting the celebration of Jesus' birth, and now that it has happened, what have we seen? We might also say, not much. We've marked the day with worship and gift-giving and family meals, but the world is the same as it was before Christmas. As it was for Simeon and for Anna, so it is for us. But in our celebration of the birth of the Christ child we have the *promise* of things to come. Do we see it? Do we recognize it with the same sense of yearning fulfilled that Simeon and Anna do? Do we have the eyes of faith that are needed to see God's salvation in a tiny baby? Does it drive us to praise and to a sense of peace? Do we share in their faithfulness?

Mary was faithful, as were the shepherds, as was Zechariah—but they all had angels come to them. And, arguably, it is easier to believe and to praise God when you are doing it alongside the heavenly host. All Simeon and Anna had to go on was a promise and a baby that a young couple had brought to the Temple—as so many young couples had done before. It wasn't an unusual act—Mary and Joseph were fulfilling a religious ritual obligation, perhaps something akin to an infant baptism. They could have been any couple; Jesus could have been any baby. It wasn't anything out-of-the-ordinary. But through the eyes of faith, Simeon and Anna were able to see God's promised hope in the midst of ordinary events.

Perhaps it is appropriate to read this story today, as this is a day which in our culture, we place a lot of emphasis on looking toward the future with hope—for some of us, we have made it through the year, and we say good riddance and hope for better in the coming year—for those of us who have had a good 2011, we hope for even more—for most of us, we see the dawning of a new year as a moment where the slate is wiped clean, where we can begin again anew, where we can try again to fulfill promises to ourselves and others. Feeling like we have a clean slate is a good thing—we do have a clean slate—but it is important to remember that there's nothing magical about January 1st, and that it is not the calendar that wipes our slate clean, but the birth of a tiny baby, which is God's grace and mercy which makes all things new.

God with us. God's promise to us. God's mercy which is new every morning. The hope that we see in the tiny baby—these are all things that are worth celebrating for the full Christmas season, they are worth more than a Christmas morning, they ought to linger with us for a while. But it is also understandable that for some people, Christmas is a day that is anticipated with anxiety and put behind as quickly as possible for some of us—because our financial situation makes gift-giving stressful, because we are celebrating the day for the first time without someone we love. Or perhaps we have looked forward to Christmas with high expectations, only to be disappointed when things didn't turn out picture-perfect. And it is a strange thing, which we notice very often in the church, that people seem to die around Christmastime more than any other time. We see this every year—we have seen it in just the past couple of weeks with the losses of Evelyn Miller, Lib Correll, and Lisa Hill. I know it from my own experience—three of four grandparents died within a week of Christmas, the fourth in January, less than a month after Christmas. Many of you have similar stories. While for many, Christmas is the happiest time of year, for many others, it is the time when stress and grief and emotional pain are the most intense.

The birth of the baby doesn't change the world, it doesn't take away the stresses and hurts that each of us face. The problems of the world are the same. No one's life is or has ever been immune from tragedy and suffering. This is the world we live in. But the Good News is that it is also the world that God, in Jesus Christ, lived in. That is the power of the Gospel, that God became human for our sake. That in Jesus Christ, God knows just what it is to face this human existence. That we do not face any of it alone.

Simeon was able to see the salvation of the world because he had spent his time expecting it—Anna could offer praise to God for the salvation of the world because she had spent her time preparing for it. And if we take the time, we, too, can have eyes to see, we can see God's presence among us, that God has come among us bringing hope and salvation. With the eyes of faith, we can see God's grace in the places that seem ordinary by most accounts—in the birth of a tiny baby, in the gathering together of young and old in community, even in the way we count our days.

There is more to come in the life of Jesus, of course. There is more to learn about than just his birth. We have a liturgical year in front of us to contemplate the healings, to model our lives after the feeding of the hungry and the acceptance of outcasts, to survey the wondrous cross, and to give thanks for the beginning of the church. But for now, we have this baby. We have God with us. And that is worth celebrating.

So let's not shortchange this season. Our lives are guided by a calendar—there is no getting around that—but we can choose which calendar guides us. We can follow the rhythms of the world, of the retail cycle, or we can mark our time with God's own story. Christmas is not over because it is not only an event in our history, but an ongoing way of living—a recognition of God with us and an invitation to hope. God's gift to us at Christmas is a gift given again and again. Let us continue—at least for the next five days—to remember in our hearts the birth of our Savior. Let us give this celebration the time it deserves. Let us give thanks that God is with us.

Amen.