

WATCHING & WAITING FOR GOD TO SHOW UP!

Luke 2:21-40

December 26, 2021

Jimmy was nine when his mother told him that his little sister would die if she didn't get a blood transfusion, and Jimmy was one of the only people that had the rare blood type that she needed. So, his mother asked Jimmy if he was willing to let the doctors give his blood to his sister. Jimmy became very somber; he didn't know what was involved, but he loved his sister, so he agreed to let her have his blood. On the appointed day Jimmy was solemn but brave. The nurse put the needle in his arm and started to draw the blood and as Jimmy was watching his blood fill the bag, he started to get scared. The nurse said, "*Don't worry it will be over soon.*" The boy accepted her assurances and asked, "*How much longer will it be before I die?*" The nurse was shocked, "*You are not going to die!*" she said, and then wept when she realized that Jimmy thought he had to give all of his blood to save his little sister.

What a powerful story of sacrificial love! And that's what the Christmas season is about, a powerful story of sacrificial love – "*For God so loved the world that He gave us His one-and-only Son,*" so that He would willingly give all of His blood and die. Unlike Jimmy, Jesus had to give all of His blood, laying down His life for us. So, Christmas is a time of giving, a time to check our heart to see if we have a heart filled with generosity, and give sacrificially for all the right reasons!

This Advent season we have been looking at the Christmas story through the eyes of Jesus' step-father – faithful Joseph who is a model of sacrificial giving. Although not His biological father, Joseph adopted Jesus as his son, protected Him, provided for Him, teaching Him the family trade of carpentry and mentored Jesus during those important formative years as He was growing up. As we have been looking at the life of Joseph over this Advent season, at every mention of Joseph in the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, we see Joseph's faithfulness as a man of God who fulfilled the calling God had placed on his life. Matthew's Gospel account tells us that Joseph "*was a righteous man faithful to the law,*" always wanting to do what was right as a devoted follower of Yahweh, not wanting to publicly humiliate Mary when he found out she was pregnant. And then, Joseph didn't dismiss the dream as bad pizza, but immediately took Mary as his wife to protect her, taking the blame and shame upon himself, allowing others to believe that he was the father.

Last week we looked at how faithful Joseph protected and cared for Mary on that long difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem and the humble birth of Jesus in a stable surrounded by animals and visited by the lowest-of-the-low, the night shift shepherds. In our reading today from Luke's Gospel, we learn that Joseph was faithful in following the requirements of the Jewish law, as outlined in the Old Testament book of Leviticus, where the Jews were given very specific instructions regarding what is to take place after a child's birth. When a male child is born, it is required by law that every Jewish family would enter that child into a covenant with God, the everlasting covenant that was instituted between God and their patriarch Abraham, that they were blessed to be a blessing. The sign of this covenant was circumcision, as we read in **Luke 2:21**, "*On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.*"

In many ways we still carry on this ancient tradition today as we practice infant baptism or infant dedication. As believers, we dedicate our children to the Lord when they are infants, and then promise to raise them in the Christian faith, so that when they come of age, they would confirm the promise that we made on their behalf, while they were infants. I was baptised as an infant in the Roman Catholic Church and am thankful for my Roman Catholic heritage where we practiced the public rite of "*confirmation*," when we reached the age of 12 or 13. Confirming what our parents promised when we were infants that we would follow Christ. The Bishop of the London Diocese would come to the Dresden parish and at the Sunday mass would confirm our decision to serve the Lord. I still recall that day, it had a definite impact on me. I also realized the importance of baptized by immersion, and when I was given the opportunity, when Laurie and I first visited Israel ten years ago, I was baptized in the Jordan River!

At eight days old, according to the Jewish Law, Joseph took Jesus to be circumcised, and the reason they waited until the eighth day was because that's when a baby's blood had the greatest ability to clot. At circumcision, Joseph would have placed Jesus in the hands of the person who would hold the baby during the procedure. Then, as the ceremony began the father would stand next to the trained priest or Rabbi who would circumcise the child, and they would recite the following blessing upon the infant as the procedure took place, "*Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to enter this child into the Covenant of Abraham our Father.*" Following this procedure, Joseph would have named his

son, giving Him the name “*Jesus*,” just as the angel had instructed him in his dream.

Then **Luke 2:22-24**, describes the purification rites required by the law of Moses. When a son was born, the mother went through a 40 day period of purification, and then she was to offer a sacrifice to complete the process – ***“When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (setting the child apart for God) (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is be consecrated to the Lord’), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons.’”*** When Mary give birth to Jesus, she was considered ceremonially unclean for forty days, and when those forty days had passed, Mary and Joseph would have followed the Jewish custom and taken baby Jesus to Jerusalem for His dedication at the Temple, at which time they were required by Mosaic law to offer a sacrifice. The normal sacrifice would have been a lamb, but provision was made for those who were too poor to afford a lamb, they could offer a pair of doves or pigeons instead.

Here at the Temple is where Mary and Joseph meet elderly Simeon and elderly Anna who had been living in hope, waiting, and anticipating the coming of the Messiah. They were both watching and waiting for God to show up and can teach us how to watch and wait for God to show up in our lives as well.

Before we continue on with this part of the Christmas story – we need to understand Israel’s history at the time of Christ’s birth. God’s people had not heard one word from God for 400 years, not since the last Old Testament prophet Malachi had God spoken to them. Also, during this 400 year period they had been under the rule of foreign nations, one heathen nation after another: Babylon, Persia, Greece and now, worst of all of these oppressive nations, Rome. After this long period of time God’s people had grown tired of the oppression and had enough of these foreign occupations and were anxiously waiting for God’s deliverance, waiting to return to the glory days of King David, as God had promised long ago. They were the chosen people of God, the apple of His eye, blessed to be a blessing, and were never meant to be occupied and ruled by pagans. However, because of centuries of disobedience and running after foreign gods, God took His hand of protection off of His people, allowing them to be defeated by their foreign neighbours and taken into captivity for seventy years before returning to Israel and rebuilding the temple.

Thousands of years earlier, before Christ's birth, back in the time of the patriarch's Abraham, Isaac and Jacob they had been chosen and set apart by God to be a LIGHT to their pagan neighbours, commissioned by God to show them how to worship the one true God. However, because they didn't fulfill their divine calling, because they didn't carry out the will of God, because they didn't trust God, they ended up in this dismal situation. Now oppressed by the pagans that governed them, ruled by an ungodly government. Whenever God's people are disobedient and follow pagan practices rather than God's Word. God has no choice but remove His hand of protection. The entire Old Testament made it clear that the Jews were to be a light to the Gentiles, but they never were, they never fulfilled their divine calling. So, at the time of the very first Christmas we find God's people living in darkness and longing for salvation, longing for freedom to return to their glory days; living in hope that the Messiah would soon come and save them from this Roman oppression – and then Jesus showed up in a most unexpected way – a baby in a manger!

It turns out that Israel misread the numerous prophecies found within the pages of the Old Testament, so they were looking for the wrong Messiah. They were anticipating a mighty warrior king and were definitely not looking for a baby laying in a feeding trough, born to peasants in a smelly stable filled with animal manure. God's people were looking for their Messiah to be born to royalty, born in a palace, lying in a royal cradle, born to a king and queen, so the vast majority missed the coming of their Messiah. And, because God's people missed the coming of their Messiah that very first Christmas, thirty-three years later, they ended up crucifying their Messiah between two criminals. Israel ended up rejecting the Son of God as He walked this earth, treating their Messiah like a common criminal, all because they were looking for the wrong Messiah. However, shortly after Christ's birth, two individuals did not miss the Messiah because they were sensitive to the Holy Spirit, watching and waiting for God to show up. So they recognized the Messiah when He appeared at the temple!

Getting back to the story of Simeon, let's imagine a white-haired fellow slowly making his way down the streets of Jerusalem heading towards the Temple. On his way, friends chat to Simeon on the street corners, shopkeepers greet him along the way, and he returns the greetings, but doesn't take the time to stop on that particular day. He is on a mission; the Holy Spirit promised him that he would see the Messiah before he died and on this day Luke's Gospel tells us, ***"That day the***

Spirit led him to the Temple” (Luke 2:27). Could this be the day Simeon has been waiting for? YES, it is the day Simeon has been waiting for. His divine encounter with the Christ child occurs forty days after the birth of Jesus, it occurs the day Joseph and Mary bring their son to the Temple to present Him to the Lord. For Joseph and Mary, it was the day to fulfill what the Law of Moses required, to dedicate Jesus to the Lord and offer a sacrifice, what all devote Jewish couples would do. Nothing out of the ordinary! Just another day at the temple!

But for Simeon, it became the glorious day of rejoicing, the day of celebration because God showed up and fulfilled the promise God made to him *“You will not die before you have seen the Lord’s Messiah.”* Praise God! God has finally shown up! When Joseph and Mary brought baby Jesus to the Temple to do what the law required, Simeon took the baby in his arms and to the shock of both Mary and Joseph, thanked God with these words: ***“Lord and Master, I am your loving servant, and now I can die content, for you have fulfilled your promise to me. With my own eyes I have seen the Word, the Saviour you sent into the world. He will be glory for your people Israel, and the Revelation-Light for all people everywhere”*** (Luke 2:29-32). Just think of Simeon’s great faith in this statement; Simeon never heard a single word of Jesus’ teaching; he never experienced a single miracle or healing, the feeding of the 5000, the calming of the sea, the walking on water, but he didn’t need to. One look into the face of baby Jesus and Simeon knew the hope of his life had been fulfilled, God had fulfilled His promise and now he can die in peace and in contentment, because God was faithful!

But that’s not all, Luke’s story continues – there was someone else in the Temple that blessed day who had also been watching and waiting for the Messiah. This person is a prophetess named Anna, who is an aged widow who had been married only seven years before her husband passed away, and after her husband died, she chose to spend her days worshipping God. We are told that Anna – ***“Never left the Temple but stayed there night and day worshipping God with fasting and prayer”*** (Luke 2:37). Anna had been doing this for a very long time as she was said to be eight-four. Anna comes along as Simeon was prophesying over Mary and Joseph and the baby and immediately recognized this baby as the Messiah and in great joy bursts forth with a great chorus of praise to God for this promised child. Anna doesn’t have a speaking part in Luke’s historical account; however, Luke tells us that from that day forward, ***“She talked about Jesus to everyone who had been waiting for the promised King to come and deliver Jerusalem”*** (Luke 2:38). Al

because God had finally shown up for Anna as He did for Simeon and Anna can't stay quiet about the God who keeps His promises!

Simeon and Anna both noticed the SAVIOUR of the world that day, but what about the others in Jerusalem that day, why did they not recognize the coming of their Messiah? What about the people in the streets of Jerusalem that passed by Joseph and Mary on that day as they made their way to the Temple? What about the crowd in the Temple courts, especially the teachers of the Law who knew their Scriptures, and then what about the priests and religious leaders ministering to the people? Did they only see a young couple with a baby – nothing out of the ordinary, nothing special, nobody that looked like a Messiah? No one that looked like the promised King of the Jews!

What made Simeon and Anna special, what made them more observant than the others? What made them take notice, while others did not? The key is that both Simeon and Anna were actively watching and waiting for God to show up. The key was that they were waiting with anticipation, and they weren't even thrown off by an unexpected and out-of-the-ordinary divine baby showing up at the Temple. Now, I doubt that they were expecting a young peasant couple with a baby; however, when the Holy Spirit revealed to them it was this baby in Mary's arms that was the promised Messiah, they didn't hesitate, they didn't doubt, saying, *"It can't be a baby, that's impossible, our Messiah would never come as a helpless baby, making himself so vulnerable! This child can't be the Messiah, let's keep looking."* They knew God works in mysterious and in unexpected ways, and they knew immediately that this baby named Jesus is the world's answer to its darkness!

The Christmas story tells us that the majority of the people got the very first Christmas message all wrong and missed the Saviour, and many Jews today are still watching and waiting for their Messiah to show up. Isn't it ironic that the nobodies, the lowest-of-the-low night-shift shepherds, elderly Simeon and Anna, and foreign Magi from the East got it right, and Jesus became their joy and hope? Today, as believers we are watching and waiting in hope for Christ's return! And like the people long ago, will we recognize Him? Do we know the signs of His coming? Are we ready for His return or will we be caught off guard? Jesus came unexpectedly the first time, and the Scriptures tell us that Jesus will return unexpectedly at His second coming as well, like a thief in the night. So, Christmas is not only about celebrating the birth of Jesus, but also about reminding us to be

ready, watchful as we anticipate Christ's second coming, the return of our victorious King. And, just as it was with His first appearing, Jesus will come in the fullness of time, Jesus will return in an instant and we will need to have our house in order and be ready for His glorious re-appearing. So, we need to be in tune with the Holy Spirit as Simeon and Anna were, so that we would recognize the Messiah's return and not be surprised or caught off guard as the Jews were 2000 years ago.

From way back in Genesis 3 – from the Fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden to the promise God made to King David that his reign would last forever; from all of the prophets of the Old Testament to the 400 years of “*silence*” in between Malachi and Matthew, Israel was waiting on God. And, as the people of God were waiting for that first Christmas, they were undoubtedly questioning God's faithfulness; will God keep His promises to His people? Does God still love us and care about us after all these years of silence, or has He abandoned us? And today, as we wait for God to keep His promises to us today, are we not asking the same questions: “*Will God be faithful; will our prayers be answered; will our desperate needs be met; or do we have to keep waiting, and waiting, and waiting for God to show up?*” Waiting is never easy! Like waiting for can this COVID epidemic to be over, it always takes much longer than we had hoped! But one thing we can experience in the Christmas story is that God keeps His promises; God doesn't abandon His people, especially as they watch and wait with hope and anticipation during those difficult times that come along. So, when God doesn't meet our expectations of timing, it's easy to get discouraged or become frustrated and lose hope, but in reality, God's timing, His plans, and His methods of doing things are always better than ours. God is never early or late – His timing is perfect!

Not many of us are good at waiting in this fast paced world, so the big question for us is this, “*What kind of person am I becoming while I wait? Can I watch and wait with patience and faithfulness, trusting in the Lord? Am I at peace, hopefully and waiting in anticipation with joy?*” And lastly, what do you do if God doesn't show up when you expect Him to show up? My experience is that sometimes we have to trust God and go through it, and depend upon Him regardless of what we are experiencing! Think of Joseph and Mary's dilemma – an unmarried virgin is pregnant by means of the Holy Spirit (try to explain that one to your husband or family members); they get married and the scandal and gossip continues, they are

shunned by their families, friends and villagers, they are all alone in this shameful situation; then at nine months of pregnancy God decides to send them on a long difficult journey with Mary riding on the back of a donkey for days-on-end; then once they get to Bethlehem they can't find a place to stay and end up in a smelly manure filled stable; the babies time to be born comes and this young couple are scared to death; then once the baby is born they are visited by a group of low-life shepherds that haven't had a bath in years; then they are visited by these strange Magi bringing them totally impractical gifts for a child; and then to top it all off, they have to flee to Egypt with only the clothes on their back to save Jesus from being butchered by an out-of-control king. Does your greatest need right now match any of that? I DON'T THINK SO!

Was God's hand in this Christmas story mess! Did God know what He was doing? Did God abandon this young couple or was God looking after every detail of Joseph and Mary's life through all of this mess? Joseph and Mary knew they were chosen for a special assignment because of the visit of an angel, but I wonder if they ever thought it would be this difficult and this messy, and where they ever overwhelmed by their difficult situations? To make it through physically and emotionally, they needed divine help, they needed to see God's big picture, and they needed to understand what God was doing in them and through them. They especially needed to see their present situation as temporary, they needed to fix their eyes on the future to help them survive the heartaches and difficulties of their present situation. So, as we read the Christmas story, we need to believe that Joseph and Mary had peace in the midst of their chaos. They must have trusted God and His promises. I believe they had to have peace, because they must have focused their lives on why God had sent His Son into the world, and why they were chosen for this difficult assignment.

The Christmas story is not a cute nativity scene story we see on our Christmas cards; instead, it's an unbelievable outrageous story, orchestrated by a God of surprises, by a God who does the unexpected. Simeon and Anna were ready for the unexpected God of surprises; they weren't caught off guard by a baby Jesus. Simeon and Anna expected the unexpected! So, as we watch and wait for God to show up in our lives, I wonder if we are guilty of putting man-made controls on God, because we want a God who is safe, predictable, and manageable. I wonder if we have somehow put God in a box and expect Him to operate under certain guidelines or follow a certain set of rules or do what He has done in the past.

What if God doesn't play by our rules, or follow our well planned guidelines, or doesn't show up the way we expect? What if God wants to do something new and work in some unexpected and mysterious way here at SCCC? And if God does, are we open to the unexpected like Simeon and Anna were?

Will we recognize what God is doing among us? Are we open to the unexpected that challenges our faith, taking us out of our comfort zones! So, no matter how difficult life can become, as believers we should never stop worshiping and singing the songs of heaven; never stop praying in perseverance, and never stop expecting the unexpected from a God of surprises. And we need to especially look for God in the weird stuff – like a baby born in a smelly stable filled with animal manure. When God shows up He changes everything and everything begins to change!

*He looked like anything but a king. His face is prunish and red. His cry, though strong and healthy, is still the helpless piercing cry of a baby. And he is absolutely dependent on Mary for his well-being. Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. Divinity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager and in the presence of a carpenter. Mary touches the face of the infant God, asking “**How long was your journey.**”*

This baby was overlooked by the universe. These rags keeping him warm were the robes of eternity. His golden throne room had been abandoned in favour of a dirty sheep pen. And worshipping angels had been replaced with kind but bewildered shepherds. Meanwhile the city hums. The merchants are unaware that God has visited their planet. The innkeeper would never believe that he just sent God into the cold. And the people would scoff at anyone who told them the Messiah lay in the arms of a teenager on the outskirts of their village. They were all too busy to consider the possibility. Those who missed His Majesty's arrival that night missed it not because of evil acts or malice; no, they missed it because they simply weren't looking. Little has changed in the last 2000 years, has it?

From “*God Came Near*” by Max Lucado