

“Something Worth Waiting For”
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Merry Christmas! . . . Merry Christmas! . . . Come on now folks, do you know what season this is? How many of you have been asked this morning, “Did you have a nice Christmas?” Well, I have. All morning I have been asked if I had a good Christmas. Right away, that implies that Christmas is in the past, but it is not. NO! In fact, today is known as Christmas I or the first Sunday of Christmas after the birth of Jesus. Do you get it? Advent began in hope with our expecting the coming of Christ, and now comes the promise of deliverance through the birth of Christ. Neat huh? Yeah, we have several more days of saying, “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year”, and if we are lucky, maybe WITHOUT the Christmas music on the radio!

Now I need to go ahead and say to the students, “This is not for you this morning. Well, okay, it is FOR you, but I don’t think you will grasp it.” Let me tell you why. My sermon is about waiting. That’s right, it is about waiting and I know you have not had much practice with that concept. You live in a culture that has made efficiency a moral requirement and debit/credit-card purchasing a way of life. Delays are frustrating for you. You have instant messaging, fast food, and express deliveries. Waiting for anything is a waste of your time. I am certain you consider it a poor use of your gifts and resources.

Your world is moving so fast. Things change at such an incredible pace. Information travels so quickly and is now so numerous. Let me share some interesting facts and figures with you. Did You Know . . .

- The number of text messages sent and received everyday exceeds the total population of the planet?
- There are 31 Billion searches on Google every month. In 2006 this number was 2.7 billion.
- The top in-demand jobs in 2010 did not exist in 2004.
- Students are currently being prepared for jobs that don’t yet exist using technologies that haven’t been invented in order to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.
- The amount of new technical information is doubling every 2 years. For students starting a 4 year technical degree, this means that half of what they learn in their first year of study will be outdated by their third year of study.
- There will be 4 exabytes of unique information created this year – more than the previous 5000 years.
- Years it took to reach a market audience of 50 million –
 - Radio – 38 years
 - TV - 13 years
 - Internet – 4 years
 - Ipod - 3 years

- Facebook – 2 years

That is your world and yet today I want to talk to you about something worth waiting for. I can only imagine what is going through your minds because I am certain you have your own ideas. No matter how you look at it, waiting is part of life. An example is a couple expecting a child. It is going to take 9 months barring any problem they might have.

Waiting can be different depending on position. For example, back in September of 1990 I thought waiting was a good idea. It was 11:40 pm on the 13th. In my very sweetest voice I said to Debbie who was about to deliver our son, Will, “Sweetheart, if you can just hold on for another 20 minutes or so, he will be born on the 14th and that is my favorite number”! I won’t repeat what she said, but we will suffice it to say that he was born shortly after that and NOT on the 14th.

In 1987 it was December 24th before we were able to bring Aubrey home from the hospital even though she was born on the 12th. The reason was an answered prayer that shouldn’t have been prayed. The year before we had come home from the hospital after a miscarriage and dnc for Deb. She had prayed that she would be bringing a baby home that same time next year. We did! But the waiting was so hard wondering if Aubrey would survive the beta-strepp that attacked her body.

Today our story is about waiting, but I have gotten ahead of myself, so let’s look at our passage . . .

What we find is Jesus and his family at the temple completing the cultural traditions of his day. There were three of them At eight days, Jesus was circumcised. Then at thirty one days old, if it was a normal process, he would have been brought to the temple in Jerusalem for the service of dedication. Then, on the fortieth day, there was a third ritual of childhood, and this ritual had to do with Mary. It was called the rite of purification. Not for the baby but for the mother. Mary needed to be purified. If she had given birth to a boy, she was to stay at home for forty days and not come out of the house. If she gave birth to a girl, she was to remain at home for eighty days. I have a feeling that this was the way a patriarchal society punished a woman for giving birth to a daughter rather than a son. In a patriarch society, boys were more valued than girls. If a mother gave birth to a daughter, she was to remain home for twice as long. According to the Jewish law, Mary was to come to the synagogue on the fortieth day. The law told her to offer a sacrifice of a lamb or if she could not afford a lamb, she was to offer two turtle doves or two pigeons. She sacrifices two turtle doves or two pigeons and this indicates that Jesus was raised in a poor family.

This is where we are introduced to our heroes for the day. This is where we meet Simeon and Anna. Simeon is described as righteous and devout. From what is written, he must have been a very spiritual person, for it states that the Holy Spirit was upon him. It was through the Holy Spirit that Simeon understood he would see the Christ before died. Many believe he was up in years and even waiting for this moment so he could die. He

had the credentials of a prophet – open to the work of God in his life and speaking by the Spirit’s power.

The other is Anna who is described as a prophetess. According to the scripture she was married for 7 years before being widowed for 77 years or until she was 84. “She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying”. I believe I was just a bit delusional when I first started looking at this because on my first read through I started laughing. I could almost hear her saying, “If I ever get out of this marriage, Lord, I will go straight to the temple and spend my time worshipping, fasting, and praying!” Of course we know that in those times a faithful widow without family and never remarried would be without support and be dependant on the generosity of others to live.

It is through these two people that the identification of Jesus is taken into another dimension beyond the babe in a manger. Simeon looks backward and sees Jesus as the fulfillment of Israel’s prophetic hopes. Anna bursts forth with the good news of deliverance. They had spent their lives waiting for the redemption God had promised. Surely this promise inhabited most of the children of God to some degree, rising occasionally to the surface and taking form in a distinct longing or hope, but then fading back into the far recesses of reality and what was happening in the day.

But Anna and Simeon lived distinctly in the perpetual presence of this promise. Their entire lives were charged with this belief, and so they comprehended their world and all in it in relationship to God’s certain faithfulness. AND that is about as optimistic as a person can possibly be. These contemplatives, these two elderly spirituals who appeared so oddly out of touch with the world as it was, knew far more about it than those whose days were spent mastering the marketplace. It is from them that we have a guide to what we need to be today, for they exhibit at least three characteristics we might consider for our own lives.

The first is expectancy.

They expect God to act. In their personal relationships with God they believe God will do what He says. They perhaps read, or not, but in their lives they pray and listen to the point of hearing the voice of God telling them what they need to do, what they need to believe, what they can expect. These two are on the front end of Jesus’ life. They are not even on the front end of his ministry, but his life. They cannot see what we can see as we look at it from where we sit, but they can see a baby and KNOW.

Simeon saw the child. But what has he seen, really? It’s just a little child in his arms, a powerless, speechless newcomer to the world. Whatever salvation this baby might work is still only a promise and a hope; whatever teaching he might offer will remain hidden for many years. Nothing has happened yet. Herod still sits on his throne and Caesar governs from afar. The world looks as it did before.

But Simeon stands there in grateful wonder. It is the future he holds in his hands. He has seen and touched it. He is satisfied. It is, as he said, enough. And then Anna, also old and

approaching the end of her days, adds her own joy and praise to the moment. She'll be telling everybody about this baby whom she saw for just a few minutes. They have lived their lives with a sense of expectancy.

The second is openness.

They are open to a vision of God acting in history. They cannot actually see it happening, but they have held on to a belief that God will act through history. By the time a mature Jesus comes onto the stage of history, Simeon and Anna will be long dead. So will most of those shepherds who came to see the child in the manger, and possibly Joseph, who watched over him, and some or all of the magi who feature in the other nativity story. Thirty years or more will pass before the gospel story recommences in the ministry of Jesus. In the meantime they who saw the baby, knelt at the stable or laid their tributes before him would not know what became of him. They would know only what they had heard and seen back then.

Our part of the scripture this morning concerning Simeon and Anna could be seen as no more than an accidental effect of the nativity story, but I feel that it offers us both connection and encouragement. We too are people who have seen something but not its full unfolding. Paradoxically, Simeon and Anna do not so much belong to the gospel's prehistory as they are a model for our own experience of that gospel.

What we have, in a sense, is hardly more than they had. We have the scriptures that school us in hope and attentiveness. We have stories and covenants and signs. We have moments, or the memory of moments, when the tender compassion of our God has come close enough to see and feel. We have something like the shepherds would have had, recalling all their lives a night of mysterious glory, or like what the magi brought back to their homelands, a vision of a different kind of king and kingdom. Their eyes had seen the glory of Israel, the light for the nations.

We have that as well, though for us the world has resumed its usual form and, seems largely unsaved and unchanged. But we can have a vision and it is in the form of our children who are briefly entrusted to our arms for blessing and who will, we hope, live on after us. We pray that their lives will be grand with wisdom and courage and that they will make the world better. As we get older, life becomes increasingly about them and less and less about us. When I hold a child in my arms, as Simeon cradled Jesus in his, my life seems literally re-centered: not in myself but just in front of me there. It is around this present future, this vulnerable and miraculous little one that God will work. We must approach the idea with openness.

The third characteristic is awareness.

I didn't know what word to use here, but the picture I want you to see is how Simeon and Anna looked for the signs, no matter how simple or ordinary. In other words, they were so certain of God's promise to them that they noticed little things like a baby being dedicated and parents giving thanks. The key to the "big picture" is small photos.

The story is told of a construction worker welding on top of a water tower outside of Chicago. He unhooked his safety gear to reach for some pipes, and as he did so, a metal cage slipped and bumped the scaffolding he was on sending him to the ground 110 feet below. He landed on a pile of soft dirt which kept him from being killed, but when the paramedics arrived his only request was a humorous one, "Please don't drop me!"

We often hope to find God in grand announcements or events. Perhaps we hope the angel Gabriel will sound the trumpet. What I want to remind you of this morning is the "still small voice", that scripture reminds us over and over to "be still". In the hustle and bustle of life, in the rapidness of advancing technology, in the swiftness of our world, it is in the waiting that we will be rewarded. If Christmas for you and me ends with the passing of December 25th, we miss the promise and fulfillment of the divine gift that has been offered to us.

I got back this past Monday evening from a 5 day trip to Sapelo Island. It is a place off the coast of Georgia and was first brought to my attention by one of the former students from Smoke Rise. There is a WMA there and the student suggested many years ago that we complete the paper work to have our names drawn for the quota hunts they have there. All these years have passed now and we never did turn in the papers, so we never went. Sapelo is still very primitive, having not succumbed yet to commercialism. I was privileged to get to go with a group of six for a 3 day hunt. I had the best time even though it was hard to be away, and I just don't typically do things like this for myself, but it was definitely worth waiting for!!!

This morning I say to you that Christ is worth waiting for. If you have never asked Christ into your heart, today is the day to do that. I will be down at the front to meet you and I will pray with you. Perhaps you are looking for a church home and want to join us here? Maybe you would want to come and pray here at the front. If you have a decision to make, I encourage you to do that this morning, but I also want to offer a challenge. Simeon and Anna waited basically their entire lives for the answer to a promise. Is there something you are waiting for? Is there a promise you feel God has made to you and you would like to see its fulfillment?

Stand with me today as we sing Hymn 95 "Go Tell It On The Mountain." You know Anna, as soon as she saw Jesus, could not keep from telling everyone about Him. What about you this morning? Stand and sing.

