

First Sunday of Christmas
Luke 2: 22-40
December 27, 2020
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They weren't young anymore, Simeon and Anna. Simeon was ready to die and Anna was both old and a widow.

But there they were – in the temple – at the end of the birth story recorded in the Gospel of Luke.

Actually, Anna and Simeon join a rather surprising group of people from the first two chapters of Luke – the first to witness the birth of Jesus.

There's silent Zechariah and barren Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, shepherds from the fields, and now, Simeon and Anna. They are the aged, the widowed, the barren, the marginalized. It's an inclusive bunch – in gender, social standing, and religious observance.

And, most surprising of all, it's a newborn baby who overwhelms them with joy – bringing the hope of God's salvation.

Think about those shepherds. I'd be pretty scared – following an angel's command to go meet the "Saviour, Christ the Lord." But, a baby – meeting a baby wouldn't be so scary.

Now, Mary and Joseph bring their newborn to the temple. No doubt, they thought the shepherds' visit in Bethlehem was surprising. Meeting Simeon and Anna will cause even greater wonderment.

For, these aged truth-tellers will boldly announce that through this child, God's salvation is being made known to all people.

In Luke, those who receive the good news of Jesus – and those who proclaim it - are a beautifully varied bunch.

And so are we. It's hard to imagine the vast mix of people who are listening to this sermon today. We are 145 different congregations in the Minneapolis Area Synod, worshipping in 8 different languages.

Though not all congregations will use this service – and I'm pretty sure that not every congregational member will tune in – our worship community will be diverse in age, class, gender, race, sexual orientation, talents, passions, faith, doubt, hope and despair.

And, that is why the Christmas message is so unbelievably powerful. The gospel comes to all people; God's salvation is for all.

Most of us are worshipping today from our living rooms – watching the service on a screen. Sadly, most of us worshipped from home on Christmas Eve. No tree-lit sanctuary, no room filled to the brim with people holding candles and singing silent night.

And yet, the first announcement of Jesus' birth wasn't made in the temple – not in a sanctuary of any kind. It was proclaimed in the fields where shepherds – likely from the bottom rung of the social ladder – were the first to hear the good news. What is more, in the words of Craig Satterlee, the shepherds were not just outsiders. He writes:

Spend enough time in the field, shunned by decent and religious folk, disappointed by God, or overwhelmed by grief, and we stop caring that we are outsiders.

We give up trying to get inside religion, or even give up on God, and just get on with life.

But God does not give up on us. God sends angels to people who have given up on God.

2020 may have felt like a year in the wilderness – so many unknowns, so much waiting, cut off from physical touch. Only you know how this has affected your faith. But know this, you are not alone if it has.

And, more importantly, know this as well: Even if you have given up on God, God has not given up on you.

The power of Christmas is the inbreaking of God's Grace into every corner of this world. Whether we are strong or weak, recognized or forgotten, fervent in faith or spiritually starving, God brings good news to us right there where we are.

But there's more. The Christmas story is also filled with the most unlikely prophets and witnesses – called and empowered by God's Spirit: outcast shepherds talking about all they'd heard and seen, an unmarried young woman singing a Magnificat of good news to the poor and hungry, blessing for the sorrowful and lowly.

So, today, as you sit in your home, know this: God can meet you there with good news. And God can use you as a witness to God's love.

Already in the first two chapters of the gospel, Luke makes it very clear that God's Spirit empowers witnesses from among the poor, the young, the old, the powerless.

And this will become even clearer in Luke's second volume – the Acts of the Apostles – where the Spirit is poured out on all flesh – the young who see visions and the old who dream dreams.

“If the spirit of God continues to work in every time, and if the spirit's chosen instrument is the human body, then witnesses and prophets are among us here, right now.” (Luke Timothy Johnson)

And don't be surprised if that witness is you. Yes you, sitting on your couch in your pajamas, not quite sure if your faith is a glowing candle or a dimly burning wick. It's the Spirit that calls and empowers.

And, though the pandemic greatly limits the movement of our human bodies – “don't go there; don't touch that” – we can still use our hands to write a letter to a lonely friend, use our voice to call our legislator appealing for unemployment benefits; we can use our fingers to scroll through the ELCA website and contribute to the hunger appeal, or show our beautiful faces on a congregational zoom call - for Bible study or that committee working on racial justice. God can use us – each of us – as God's hands in the world.

In addition to 2020 being the year of the pandemic, it also marked the 50th anniversary of our church's decision to ordain of women.

My first call – 38 years ago – was to Zion Lutheran in Iowa City. Back then, the Iowa Bishop gathered all the state's female pastors together once a year for support and encouragement. The first years we all could've fit in a phone booth.

Though small, it was an amazing gathering— April Larson who went on to become the first female bishop; Connie Kleingartner, who became one of the first female seminary professors.

I especially remember one conversation we shared during a retreat. One of the more soft-spoken women finally said, “I just look forward to the day when the church doesn’t see me as a problem. I am a gift to the church.”

Those early days, we were often seen as problems – problems for bishops who couldn’t help us find calls; problems because we didn’t always fit the mold of what pastoral authority had always looked like.

“I am a gift,” my colleague said. “A gift to the church.”

You are a gift, dear friends in Christ. Out of love, God brings to you good news of great joy in Jesus. And, with Simeon and Anna, with shepherds and a young mother called Mary, God sends you forth in love by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Oh, I wish I had a crystal ball and could tell you what the year ahead will bring; I wish I could predict when there will be vaccines for everyone; I wish I could tell you when herd immunity will make it ok for your grandkids spend the night; ok to open your restaurant or small business, ok for you gather with your high school friends at a coffee shop; ok to hug all your siblings in Christ at worship.

We will continue in the wilderness of uncertainty for a while. And, you may be tempted to give up. But, God doesn’t give up on you. God is here with us – to bring good news again and again and again. And, God is here with us – anointing us with Spirit’s power that we might – again and again – share God’s love with others. Amen.