

Will We Notice the Extraordinary in the Everyday?

On this fifth day of Christmas, on the cusp of a new calendar year, may we notice the gift it is to be gathered together – via live stream and in this house of worship on land that has been loved by First Nations and other people long before us and which we intend to cherish long into the future.

As we begin this time of reflection, let's join our hearts together in prayer: God, you are the deep love and wisdom that gives our lives meaning and purpose. As we wonder about the character and moments in Jesus' infancy and childhood, expand our hearts and our minds so that we might more fully embrace your Christ child once again this Christmas. Amen.

Henry David Thoreau, 19th century naturalist and essayist once wrote this: *"None are so old as those who have outlived enthusiasm."* When we experience enthusiasm, we feel enjoyment or interest with intensity and eagerness. The revised common lectionary is used by many Christians worldwide to move through a bulk of the biblical text in a three-year cycle. Today, the lectionary offers us the story of two elders (Simeon and Anna) who have decidedly not outlived enthusiasm. May their enthusiasm (depicted beautifully on the cover of our bulletin) lead us to notice the extraordinary aspects of Jesus' childhood moments and open us to the extraordinary in our own everyday experiences.

Our gospel reading opens right where we left off on Christmas Eve. Luke two, verse 20 says, *"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them."* Then, in verse 21, we read of Jesus being circumcised and his name declared at eight days old. That would have been an intimate gathering at someone's home in Bethlehem, where they were staying temporarily.

Then the narrative jumps to day forty of Jesus' life, when Mary would need to go through ritual purification and the baby would be dedicated to God. For this, they traveled from Bethlehem to the Temple in Jerusalem. Families who could afford it offered a lamb as a ritual sacrifice for the purification of a mother. In their poverty, Mary and Joseph offered two pigeons. It is interesting to note that followers of Jesus would later refer to him as the Lamb of God – one who sacrificed his whole life in order to stay the course of living out God's love and justice.

Jesus was also dedicated to God at the time of Mary's purification. While it was customary for a first-born male to be dedicated to God at the Temple, many families could redeem their child for a price of five shekels of gold (equivalent to approximately forty dollars today). Mary and Joseph could not have paid that price, so Jesus would remain the son of God (a name often used for him throughout Christian writings).

Those are the everyday details that provide context for the encounter among five devout Jews – Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Simeon and Anna.

Enter two elders who had not outlived enthusiasm. Simeon and Anna have been described by contemporary preacher Fred Craddock in this way: *“These two aged saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises.”*

Their devout obedience to God's Word is met with the movement of the Holy Spirit in the extraordinary interactions that unfold among the characters. As Simeon holds six-week old Jesus in his arms, his response exceeds Mary's and Joseph's expectations. In his prophetic wisdom, he sees more than the young parents could see in that moment.

Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey describes Simeon's capacity in this way: *"the ability of Simeon to see more than a baby in his arms, to see within and beyond this baby to God's hand at work in the world."* Jesus was an Epiphany for Simeon—a sign of God's active presence in the world.

Matthews Huey continues: *"The narrator of Marilynne Robinson's deeply moving book, Gilead, reflects on what it means for one person to bless another. The elderly pastor in the book, the narrator, says the reality of blessing is that it 'doesn't enhance sacredness but acknowledges it, and there is a power in that. I have felt it pass through me, so to speak. The sensation is of really knowing a creature, I mean really feeling its mysterious life and your own mysterious life at the same time.'* Simeon, holding the baby Jesus that day in the temple, surely did not comprehend the mystery in his arms. But he allowed for the possibilities of God's power to unfold in ways he could not imagine but only hope for." Words from Rev. Kathryn Matthews Huey.

Simeon was so moved by the sacredness he experienced in holding the baby Jesus that he spoke directly to Mary, a woman he didn't know. A man speaking to a woman outside his own familial circle was culturally discouraged. Yet Simeon honored Mary's full personhood by engaging with her directly. It seems to me that Simeon's extraordinary behavior would stick with the baby Jesus, who got in a whole lot of trouble years later for the same humanizing behavior of engaging with women in conversation.

I wonder this morning: Do we see God's hand at work when we look at one another and others with whom we share other spaces in our lives? To see God at work through one another is to notice the extraordinary in the everyday.

With Simeon's blessing also comes a prophetic word of challenge: The gospel message of forgiveness, healing, and salvation—the future ministry of Jesus—would not be accepted by all. Preacher Fed Craddock has also written about the risks Jesus would take. Craddock writes: *“Jesus will bring truth to light and in so doing throw all who come in contact with him into a crisis of decision. In that decision, rising and falling, life and death, result. Jesus precipitates the centrally important movement of one's life, toward God or away from God... The inescapable fact is that anyone who turns on light creates shadows. This is what is meant literally by ‘making a difference.’”*

Following Jesus has always involved risk. Jesus' earliest followers would risk the anger of Roman authorities who sought to keep everyone in the land aligned with full devotion to Caesar. Those who have stuck out their necks in pursuit of justice and equity for the oppressed (long ago and today) have shown extraordinary bravery in their everyday devotion to the way of God's love for all. **I wonder: What do we risk today by bringing the truth of God's all-inclusive love to light among our circles of friends, coworkers, family? Do we risk alienation or rejection? Is sharing God's love worth the risks we take to do so?**

To recap this story of Mary's purification and Jesus' dedication, how did the people in the story respond?

- Simeon sung blessings and spoke difficult truths, risking the wrath of the powerful and naming the future heartbreak for Mary and Joseph.
- Anna praised God, telling anyone she could about her visceral experience of the Messiah's arrival in the baby Jesus.
- Mary and Joseph, amazed and confused, returned home to raise their son in the Way of God's love.

Let's also ponder for a moment the story of Jesus among his elders in the Temple during Passover at the age of twelve, deep in conversation about the sacred texts of their faith. There are many ways to see the story of Jesus lingering in the Temple. We often reduce it to a moralistic tale about how patient or impatient, anxious or non-anxious Jesus' parents were... and how obedient or disobedient Jesus was to his parent or to his sense of the will of God for his life.

I think the most important lesson from this story for us today (individually and as a new congregation moving into the second year of our new life) is how Jesus was welcomed by his elders. And this leads me to share with you on this first Sunday in Christmastide 2024 the story of my call to ministry in the fall of 1990.

Proverbs 3 verses 27 and 28 reads, *“Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again. Tomorrow I will give it’—when you have it with you.”*

At the age of eight, I began my first adventure in community service. My mother had discovered that I enjoyed reading aloud (and I was moving along the cusp from introversion to extroversion), so she contacted our local nursing home in an attempt to find a one-to-one reading partner for me. Instead of establishing a one-to-one relationship, the program director arranged for me to provide pre-dinner entertainment in the community room for all who wished to attend. I played piano accompaniment for sing-alongs, read poetry and short stories, and mingled with residents every Wednesday afternoon for the remainder of my childhood (third grade through eighth grade).

My call to ministry began in that nursing home as I experienced the hospitality of my elders. Ruth engaged me in conversation while we worked jigsaw puzzles together. Bill situated himself right next to my piano, smiling and chatting with me occasionally. Annie always greeted me in the hallway with a piece of hard candy and a generous smile. Her smile communicated a welcome that multiple strokes would not allow her to communicate through speech. It was during those six years of Wednesday afternoons that I began to discover my greatest passion: being with people in community.

Let's hear a few more words from Matthews Huey about future generations of our church: *"We are their ancestors, and they are our heirs. Those heirs of ours will look back and hear the story of how we, in these days long ago, dreamed of them and built up this great church to be a place of warm and open welcome, a place of justice and love, a place where we all move over and make room for every single person, a place that can be a home where we sincerely tell each new person, 'We've been waiting for you.'"*

It is my deep belief that Jesus felt that his elders in the Temple had been waiting for him.

So let's go forward, noticing the extraordinary in the everyday.

May we see the face of Christ (God's love made known) in each of us and in every one of our neighbors – because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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December 29, 2024 | 1st Sunday of Christmastide
Luke 2:21-52