December 24, 2017
Luke 2:25-38

Slow Down, Pay Attention: Simeon & Anna

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Luke 2:25-38 New Revised Standard Version

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

 We have been in the season of Advent as we prepare for the coming of Jesus in the manger tomorrow on Christmas morning and as we prepare for Jesus arriving in fullness in the second coming of Christ. We have looked at people who are on the sidelines of the Christmas story. Elizabeth and Zechariah, King David, and today Simeon and Anna. These are people who aren’t in nativity sets and aren’t on Christmas cards, and most people might even say that they don’t know who they are.

 We learn about Simeon and Anna in Luke’s story right after Jesus is born. In Luke, Jesus is born and eight days later Mary and Joseph take him to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill certain customs in the temple. Mary and Joseph had to dedicate Jesus in the temple, they had to name him, they had to have him be circumcised, and they had to go through some cleansing rituals. When I think of the long list of things that Mary and Joseph were expected to do, I thought of when our oldest child was born. I knew that someone would come to our hospital room and take our baby’s picture, but I didn’t know who and I didn’t know when. But I had the outfit packed in the going to the hospital bag for the hospital photo. It was something that I knew was supposed to happen and I was expected to do it. The to-do list for Mary and Joseph was a bit more important than the hospital picture, but there are all of these things that you are expected to do after a birth of a child.

Mary and Joseph are doing all of those things that they are supposed to do when they meet Simeon and Anna. Simeon and Anna are prophets. They are able to see something that other people couldn’t see. They see who Jesus really is. Simeon is the first person in Luke’s Gospel to call out who Jesus really is and Anna is the first preacher talking about Jesus to anyone who would hear.

 When Mary and Joseph were pregnant they had visits from angels, but now Jesus was here. Could it really be true what the angels had said about him? Mary and Joseph are new parents, they are overwhelmed and sleep-deprived. Jesus seems like any other baby who cries and sleeps and eats. Maybe Mary and Joseph were starting to feel silly about all of these angel visits. Mary and Joseph thought Jesus was special but then life got back to normal and maybe he was just like any other baby.

Mary and Joseph are feeling doubtful about everything and then they have this encounter with Simeon and Anna. Jesus wasn’t just like any other baby. Simeon names what he sees in Jesus. Jesus will be salvation, a God-revealing light. Then Simeon blesses Jesus. Anna who worships at the temple fasting and praying night and day comes and begins to praise God and to speak about Jesus to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem.

Here are two people to remind Mary and Joseph about what the angels had said. Here are two people to encourage Mary and Joseph that Jesus was who they had been told he was. Here are two people who told Mary and Joseph that they weren’t crazy. This was the one whom God promise. Simeon and Anna provided encouragement and affirmation that Mary and Joseph didn’t even realize they needed.

Have you ever done something new? Maybe it was having a child like Mary or Joseph or maybe it was starting a new career path or maybe it was a decision to reach out to your neighbors and learn their names. Maybe it was a decision to get to know people that you interact with everyday like the wonderful person who takes your dry cleaning or the crossing guard that you wave to every morning or the janitor at your school or work. When we are taking a new path in our life, when we have made a decision to do things differently in our life, God provides us encouragement and affirmation even when we don’t realize that we need it. God sends us prophets like Simeon and Anna to give us a reassurance that we are on the right path.

Prophets have great power in our lives because they see things in us that we don’t see. They affirm us right at the moment when doubt begins to take over. Frederick Buechner has a wonderful word about doubt, he says “If you don't have any doubts, you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.

God sends us prophets to speak a word of hope when we need it. They give us energy for the task ahead and they bless us. Do you remember a prophet that you have had in your own life? You probably didn’t call them a prophet. It might have been a teacher that encouraged you, or a coach who had patience with you. It might be a favorite author whose words inspire you. Who is a prophet to you in your life?

There have been all of these studies about job satisfaction. Researchers weren’t sure what would be the number one factor for job satisfaction. Would it be benefits or salary or work hours or flexibility? The number one factor for job satisfaction is enjoyment of the people that you work with and the words that are spoken to you. If you are hearing words of affirmation and words of encouragement, if you are hearing words celebrating what you are good at, that is what leads to job satisfaction.

You might be doing something new in your life or in your job. You might be doubting yourself and someone comes with a word of encouragement or affirmation to show you that what you are doing is meaningful. Someone tells that you are good at something that you are doing. Someone tells you that they see compassion in you or kindness or hospitality. It is amazing what encouragement can do in our lives. We need people who see things in us that we don’t necessarily see. We need prophets. We need people that name our gifts for service and ministry and people who say that they see those gifts in us.

We all need prophets. We all need encouragers. We all need people who bless us. My parents divorced when I was two years old. When my dad remarried I did not like my stepmom. Not for any good reason, I didn’t like her simply because she was my stepmom. I remember being a surly teenager and my stepmom told me that she prayed for me every day. How could I hate someone who prayed for me? I couldn’t. It is my great joy and great honor to pray for you, to lift you up to God praying for you to feel God’s presence with you giving you peace and joy and filling your heart with love.

We all need encouragement because encouragement gives us power to have energy when we feel weary, it gives us hope when we feel overwhelmed. If you aren’t feeling like you have a prophet of encouragement in your life right now, I encourage you to be a prophet of encouragement to others. Simeon and Anna teach us that we can speak words of affirmation and encouragement and bless others.

Our words have power. Whether it is a word to a co-worker, or your boss or people who work for you. Our words can be magic in someone’s life. Do you think about the words that you speak? To a significant other, a partner, a girlfriend or boyfriend, or a spouse. Our words that have the potential to bless. Our words have power. To our kids do we speak words that point out the possibilities that we see for their future? Our words have power. Think of the person who gives you coffee or checks you out at the grocery store. May we not pass up opportunities to say a word of affirmation or a blessing or a word of thanks. We may see something in someone that we want to lift up, something that we want to affirm but we don’t allow the Spirit to push us to say those words out loud to another person. People are not mind-readers. They don’t know that you think that they are doing a great job. They don’t know that you see goodness in them. People don’t know that you love them unless you tell them with your words out loud.

 Simeon and Anna also blessed others by pointing them to Jesus. They invited others to see Christ, to see God’s salvation for the world. They pointed others to the life-changing work of Jesus. God calls us to point others to the life that we have found in Christ. God calls us to point others to the joy that we have found in Christ. God calls us to point others to the forgiveness, the reconciliation, the mercy that we have found in Christ.

 There are some of you who are in this place because you were invited here by someone. I give thanks for the prophet who invited you to this place. Is there someone in your life that you could invite here? I am involved in church today because my sister’s friend invited her to youth group, then my family started going to that church. Inviting someone to Greenland Hills might be providing them the biggest blessing in their life. Thanks be to God for those who have been prophets in our life and thanks be to God for the privilege and opportunity we have to be a prophet to others. Amen.