

“Seeing Beyond”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Ecclesiastes 3:1-12

Luke 2:22-40

This is the Sunday preachers let out a huge sigh of relief. Congratulations, pastor, you have made it through the high holy days of Christmas, and not only that, you have made it and helped your church make it through the four Sundays of waiting through Advent, being directed by the purifying words of the prophets, refraining (mostly) from singing Christmas songs, and checking those Origami Advent Calendars Yukiko Aoki helped us make.

Annie Lamott, in a recent book, noted that there are only three essential prayers: Help, Thanks, and Wow. This is the Wow Sunday, when all there is left to do is praise. The prophets Anna and Simeon saw Jesus and each responded with praise toward God. Simeon in particular had been waiting, perhaps spending his life waiting, for God to reveal to him the Messiah: revelation for the Gentiles and salvation for the people of Israel. He had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before beholding the Messiah and now that this event had occurred, he felt he could be dismissed in peace.

I do not know what this kind of waiting would be like, but I understand waiting for someone you love. After years of being married to someone whose job requires that she sometimes works very late nights, I don't worry too much about her-- but I admit that I do feel more at peace, I do sleep easier, once I hear her open the door in the wee hours of the morning and head upstairs to bed. And I know parents who have lived with teenagers in

the house experience an unsettled waiting even more intensely as their adolescent sons and daughters test their independence in a world of risk. I remember once when my sister came home after curfew, and brought her date into the kitchen. My dad happened to be out of bed getting a glass of water in the dark kitchen. When he saw the headlights beam up the driveway, he quickly decided to play a memorable trick on my sister. My dad, who as a yoga instructor is a pretty agile guy, hopped onto the counter and then on top of the refrigerator, where he crouched in a statuesque thinking man pose so that when my sister led her date into the kitchen and turned the lights on, they both let out a scream to find they were being watched in quite an unexpected way! My sister could not be angry at him for frightening them because she was late for curfew after all, and, the effort he went through to show his concern and gladness at her arrival showed deep love in our dad's own weird way.

I understand the fearful waiting intensifies if your child is black, as the dangers of racism stretch further than a parent's protecting arm reach. Simeon's words to Mary may have left her feeling the same combination of wow and fear for her child that so many Black mothers feel. He tells Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed..." then he warns Mary, "—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." She could mother him, but he would not be only hers. He belonged to the world, and he belonged to God. Great things would happen through him, but sometimes those very things would break a heart.

*Steve Biko was a well-known anti-apartheid leader and a leading proponent of "black consciousness." In 1977, while he was in the custody of the South African police, he was brutally tortured and murdered. His death became the rallying point for many in the freedom struggle.*

*Alice Biko, his mother, talked openly about both the anguish and the hope that have been part of being the mother of such a son... In one of her last*

*conversations with her son, she told him how difficult it was to always be worried about him being arrested and put in jail, how she never slept at night until she knew he was at home. He had responded by reminding her that Jesus had come to redeem his people and set them free.*

*“Are you Jesus?” she asked him impatiently.*

*Steve had gently answered her, “No, I’m not. But I have the same job to do.”<sup>1</sup>*

I wonder how it was for Mary to be in the moment of the everyday experiences of parenting: bathing and feeding her son, feeling the warmth of his skin against hers, smelling his boyhood body, scolding him when he strayed from his parents’ direction, embracing him when he felt sorrow or fear. I wonder whether Mary did all these things while thinking at the same time: “The Messiah just smeared the hummus I made all over his face and the table!” Or, in a moment of Jesus showcasing some adolescent defiance, Mary wondering if *this* is what Simeon meant when he said “a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Being greeted and blessed by Anna and Simeon placed Jesus into an intergenerational web of care, again showing he did not belong to just Joseph and Mary, but to something bigger. The joys and griefs of parenthood would not just belong to Mary and Joseph. They would belong to everyone. This sharing in the love and care of children and of elders across generations is one of the vital strengths at Presbyterian Church in Leonia.

In several churches I have served, we had taught a youth sexuality and faith education course to the teenagers. Parents and church leaders had agreed that since the church kids were already learning about sex from the

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<sup>1</sup> Joyce Hollyday, *Clothed with the Sun: Biblical Women, Social Justice, and Us*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994 p. 219

locker rooms and from the internet and other forms of media, the church might as well teach it too and try to show how sexuality is a gift from God, to be enjoyed safely, ethically, and respectfully-- when a person feels physically and emotionally ready for it. We felt-- we hoped-- we could offer this information and set of values before the kids would need it, since it is the kind of information that is less helpful after the fact. The grand finale of the program involved condoms and bananas. After this, the youth were pretty overwhelmed with a mixture of joyful anticipation and anxiety, so we had scheduled a lunch break before our closing worship. Marilyn, a woman in her late 80's, had volunteered to serve lunch to the teenagers. As they lined up for the meal, Jeremy and Jasmine were goofing around and to their horror, a condom catapulted its way out and landed right on the plate Marilyn had just offered to Jeremy. He blushed as he noticed that Marilyn had not missed a thing. She looked down at the plate, and then looked over at Jeremy, and then asked him: "would you like some lasagne with that?" with a smile and a wink.

I am sure Jeremy remembered-- probably even more than whatever great advice we gave in that youth sexuality class-- that an 88 year old woman cared so much about him and the health of his future loving relationships that she would show up to serve him lasagne. Not only that, she joked in a way that showed him that she really could see him. I think-- I hope-- that kind of care made an impact on Jeremy's later sexual choices. The truth is, I knew from the weekday bible study Marilyn attended that she knew each of those kids' names, and she prayed for them by name. Marilyn had lost her own daughter years earlier due to cancer, and had no grandchildren of her own. Though her grief in life has been great, her faith has brought her to a time beyond, where the pain would not be so strong, and where there would be young people with whom she could share a smile and a wink.

I know we have some Annas and Simeons in our church now. Our faith community is just about the only place these days outside of family where people can enjoy intergenerational relationships that enrich on both ends of

the lifespan, as well as those who are holding the middle. The gospel today helps us to *see beyond* those immediately placed in our lives, to show that God uses people to care for and bless us *beyond* those who are required to do these things.

Something I think older people understand and accept better than those who have not seen so many years is that there is indeed a time for everything. Simeon knew the time had come-- once he had seen the Messiah-- to die, and he was at peace with that, as he witnessed the life that Jesus would bring forth. Mary and Joseph carefully followed the law to circumcise on the eighth day, and appear at the Temple following a period of purification. They offered sacrifices, a pair of turtledoves, just as the law required.

But the time would come when Jesus would preach and eat with the uncircumcised. The time would come when he would overturn the money changers' tables in the Temple, which were necessary for the business of making sacrifices. Jesus would institute a new way of relating to God that was through the heart, rather through gifts, and indeed in his prediction that the Temple would again be destroyed, he laid the groundwork for his body to be the Temple, rather than any one physical place being the center of worship of God. Jesus' vision helped him *see beyond* the letter of the law, to follow the spirit of the law, which should draw us closer into relationship with God and God's people.

Times will change, as the Writer in Ecclesiastes tells us. Times will change, especially if we are willing to wait for what the Holy Spirit will show us, as Anna and Simeon did. What was lost may be found. What has been written may be redefined. What has died may experience new life. It is important to live in the moment, and learn what the moment has to teach us. But it is also important to *see beyond* the moment, and have faith in what God can reveal to us in the time to come. Let Anna and Simeon,

both prophets with the vision to see *beyond* the moment we are in, to that which God calls us to become, guide us in this new year.