

Over the years, we've read about the parable of The Good Samaritan (or simply, The Good Neighbor) many, many times. Almost all of our discussions have included high praise for the neighbor who stops to help another in need. And rightly so. This person demonstrates empathy, and in that particular moment thinks of another's needs before his/her own. But many of our discussions have included higher praise for the Innkeeper. Yes, the travelling neighbor demonstrates generosity. But the Innkeeper demonstrates calling and commitment. Here is one who will do the hard work of neighboring: nursing, being responsible and accountable for another, trusting that there will be enough resources to steward the stranger's needs beyond tomorrow. And oh by the way, the Innkeeper will do the same for dozens of travelers each year, and in the years to come.

When I read the second part of the second chapter of Luke, I feel a similar sense of admiration for its minor characters. I am SO happy the shepherds didn't tell those angels to knock off all of the racket; I'm SO glad, that like Moses, and Hannah, and Samuel, and a whole host of others, they were alert enough to respond to the uniqueness of the moment. And I am SO glad that Zechariah, and Elizabeth, and Mary, and Joseph embraced the audacity of God's good news. We should rightly say, "Well done!" Here are women and men that took a chance to believe in the hope of Emanuel.

But I have to say, my admiration for Simeon and Anna exceeds that of their chapter two predecessors, and rivals that of the Innkeeper. For both Anna and Simeon, the revelation of God's presence was neither spontaneous nor serendipitous. Theirs are each a lifetime of hope, peace, joy, and love, expressed in service to others. Luke can spin it anyway he wants, describe it in fantastic terms if he wants; Luke can talk about the spontaneous movement of the spirit, or the long-anticipated promise of God's redemption, or even send another angel to convey the news. But I don't think either Simeon or Anna had a time-machine-kind-of-moment, whereby God whispered to them a prophecy that they just needed to wait for to come true. Yes, I do believe God revealed things to each of them, but not in a transactional way.

I think Anna and Simeon were raised in an environment whereby they understood that God works in and amongst God's people. For each of them, the Temple was a place for God to be realized, over and over again, day in and day out, by simple acts of love, prayer, service, and praise. Anna and Simeon realized that God berths new things every day! And Anna and Simeon had been around long enough to know what that looks like.

I'm not nearly as old, nor nearly as wise as Simeon was, and I feel certain I haven't dedicated as many children as he did. But I do know, that every time we pause to give God thanks for new life, and hold those tiny hands and feet in ours, and speak new names, and introduce them to their families of faith, there is the promise, that in this new life, God can and will be revealed. And no, I didn't get to meet Anna, but I sure have met a lot of people like her. Anna was the kind of woman that noticed the special in everyone. She was also the kind of woman that told people when she saw that special. Anna and Simeon offer the blessings and prayers of hope, and they couple that with relational service. I have a hunch, that every child brought to the temple on the same day as Jesus, and in the days prior and afterward to Jesus, received the same powerful affirmation from Anna and Simeon.

And here's what I find so compelling about this story. Jesus shares in the same kind of humble birth as you and me. And Jesus also shares in the need of supportive community just like you and me. God is revealed in Jesus, because Jesus is able to fully experience humanity: to know the miraculous and fragile nature of birth, the pain and inevitability of death, the joys and sorrows of the living in between, AND to know the love of community. Let me put it another way: Jesus is born, just like you and me, and Jesus benefits from the same kind of love as you and me. I think that means that each of our lives can also reveal God's fullness, and each of us has the ability to serve others in a way that helps our neighbors to also reveal God's fullness.

Last Friday, Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This Sunday, as we dedicate him in the Temple, I think we express our belief that Jesus can be born anew in every child.

And how, you ask, might this be? For that answer, I'll pass along the wisdom of Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers,  
To make music in the heart.

Long before those angels were even thinking about composing their chorus, Anna and Simeon were doing the work of Christmas. With expectant hope, they were greeting neighbors, welcoming strangers, loving children, expressing gratitude for all God's creatures and creation; bringing peace among their sisters and brothers, making heart music; seeing God's potential in everyone they met.

Friends, once we're done with all of our star-gazing and merry-making this season, may we, too, engage in the work of Christmas. And who knows, maybe we'll find a few innkeepers among us. I have no doubt, we'll hear a little shout of affirmation from Anna and Simeon when they appear.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.