

Christmas Joy

A dialogue between the Rev. Buzzy LeCluyse (BL), Pine Ridge Presbyterian Church, Kansas City and her daughter, the Rev. Megan LeCluyse (ML), First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.

(BL) For many of us, our Christmas celebration this year probably looked different than in years past. There may have been fewer gathered; you may be in a different city than you normally are for Christmas, and without those gatherings maybe the menu was different too. Instead of gathering together around the table, you gathered on Zoom or FaceTime'd with those you couldn't be with in person.

There have been shortages of Christmas decorations and real trees this year in part because this is a weird and challenging year, and making it a little brighter makes the season feel a little better, more festive, maybe a bit more normal. This year you may want to have that Christmas cheer hang on a bit longer, to savor it a bit, not put it back in a box so quickly. We all have to do what we can to get through what are going to be some long and difficult winter months.

(ML) That said, many years my mom is taking down the Christmas decorations before we even get to Epiphany, while Annie and I tell her they can stay up a bit longer. So often, it feels like Christmas comes and goes. We spend 4 weeks waiting and then voila, it's Christmas. In a normal year, Christmas, or at least parts of it, are bright and loud. It's almost like a light switch from Advent to Christmas, and then we walk out of the room into the other 11 months of the year. If we spend 4 weeks waiting and preparing, shouldn't Christmas, and more so what Christmas represents, the incarnation, be something we spend some time with?

Today's Scripture reading, which may be less familiar to some, invites us to do just that. It's the part of the Christmas story that helps tie everything together, that connects the waiting and preparing of Advent, the reading of the prophets, to the shepherds and the magi, and to Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. Anna and Simeon seem to be a thread from Advent into the season of Christmas, bringing the prophets, and the hopes and waiting of the Israelites to the moment of the incarnation. We've spent the past four weeks waiting and preparing. Anna and Simeon seem to have spent their whole lives waiting and preparing, or so the Scriptures tell us.

(BL) "It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah." Simeon was looking for the Messiah, but I imagine he also didn't know exactly what he was looking for. What would the Messiah look like? How would the Messiah's arrival be announced, and what would it mean? Would it mean that they would no longer be oppressed by Rome, no longer occupied by a foreign power?

We don't know how long Anna had spent in the temple, it seems like years, maybe decades, perhaps up to 6 decades if she had begun staying in the temple when she was widowed. What was it she was waiting for? I imagine after all of those years praying and fasting she must have experienced God's presence, but was she still waiting to know that it was real? That God was really present with her?

What is it we wait for, and is it really that different from what Simeon and Anna were waiting for? PAUSE I imagine they both probably knew God well enough to expect the unexpected, but I don't think they expected what would happen, that it would be the young couple from Galilee bringing their infant to be dedicated. In this young family, they found the fulfillment they had spent their lives longing for, and while the mother and child, and sometimes the father, are often depicted as this picture perfect family in works of art, the reality was as messy as life often is.

(ML) Many of us have arrived at Christmas this year feeling a little battered, tired and frayed, and you can be assured that the young couple who showed up at the temple that day probably felt the same. I know it has been a year unlike we expected but think about their year- it began with Mary being told she was bearing God's son, and Joseph being told his wife-to-be was pregnant, to having all kinds of strangers show up to see their baby.

One of the powerful things about digging into the Scriptures of the Christmas story is that what we find isn't a perfect looking Christmas card scene, or Hallmark movie, it's real people and real life, and real parents of a newborn baby.

As young Jewish parents, Mary and Joseph would have followed the Jewish rituals of their time. This would have included taking Jesus, their firstborn male child, to be dedicated to the Lord at the temple. The young parents come, with their child who is not quite a month and a half. They are probably tired and weary – they have been traveling a lot in the past two months, to Bethlehem to take part in the census (which at least we could do from our own homes), then back home after Jesus' arrival, and now to Jerusalem with their baby.

(BL) They, like young parents today, have probably been sleeping in little spurts when they can. We know they are poor, because this Scripture tells us they offered two turtle doves. Those who could afford it would have offered a lamb, and those who could not afford a lamb would offer two turtle doves. Different circumstances in different times, but the same feelings, the same concerns, the same exhaustion.

I don't think Simeon thought the Messiah he was waiting for would be a baby, or Anna expected the fulfillment of her years of prayer and fasting to arrive in the arms of a poor, young mother, but they saw it, not because the holy family had halos of light around them, because they Simeon and Anna were open to the work the Spirit of God was doing in each of them, they trusted in where the Spirit led them and what was revealed to them. And in this, they found fulfillment, and deep, abiding joy. They savored what they were experiencing, knowing it would carry them through the rest of their lives.

(ML) Christmas is for savoring, it is an invitation to experience a joy that isn't just for a day, or even for 12, it's about allowing an abiding joy to come into and fill our lives, a joy that will sustain us through what may come, including years like 2020.

My grandmother was a dog lover, we're a dog family, we've even made a dog person out of my dad. I'm a stereotypical Millennial who doesn't have children yet, but has a very spoiled fur-baby, and this all makes me think of Penny, my dog. Sometimes Penny will get a special treat, real meat being a favorite, and thinking like a human, I want her to take time to really enjoy it, to savor the tastes and flavors and appreciate it, to not just scarf it down, which is exactly what happens. I know that's not how her brain, or mouth, works, but when we can be present to the moment, we are filled in a way that continues long after the moment.

(BL) It was a long time ago but I remember. I was a new mother and Megan was about four weeks old so it was early February in the Midwest, we were living in Kansas City. It was the middle of the night and Megan was hungry so I got up to nurse her. After changing her we settled into the white rocking chair in her room. I had opened the blinds because the snow was falling, the big sparkly flake kind of snow, and I wanted to watch it as I sat with my daughter, my firstborn, in my arms. We sat in the silence of the night, just the two of us lost in the moment. Although this happened almost 35 years ago I remember it as clearly as if it just happened, the sense of joy beyond what I had previously experienced, an incredible peace and a connection with something bigger than us. I savored this moment, I still do.

This has been a year that has forced many of us to slow down, to notice more, to find joy in things we've taken for granted. In the midst of all of the challenges, we've seen some incredible creativity and compassion. Yet we know that even with a vaccine arriving at Christmastime that promises hope, the world is still a messy and broken place.

We talk about happiness, and even Christmas cheer, and those are both good things, but joy is something that is deeper, more abiding, more transforming. We truly believe that joy is not the absence of pain but the presence of God, and this is complete joy. Simeon names great joy and great suffering, which speaks to the reality of life that we have so keenly experienced especially this year.

(ML) Simeon's fulfillment, Simeon's joy comes not in the world being made right, but in God being with us in this world, in our lives, and Anna knows that this is what must be proclaimed. Anna and Simeon savor the moment, and find joy, a joy they carry with them beyond, back into the reality of the broken world. They name that this is a joy meant for all, both Jews and Gentiles, that this is a joy of inclusion. A joy they share with us in telling us their story, a story we need to hear and celebrate, a story of joy we can miss when their story is overlooked. The child will grow, the story will continue, but they invite us to take in all that is here, to recognize and appreciate its significance, to not rush on too fast.

(BL) At the end of this challenging year, we invite you to savor Christmas, yes the decorations and festivities, but much more so, the incarnation. We invite you to live into the deep joy the birth of Christ brings, God with us, the joy of knowing that the light of the world has come into the world, and the darkness, the chaos, the pain, the mess, has never overcome it. Christmas doesn't ask us to ignore reality, but invites us to find joy, to allow joy to break into our lives and sustain us, and asks us to savor that joy. When we live knowing God is with us, we can face whatever is to come. Amen.