

Stretching Toward Sunday

*Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings*

December 28, 2014
First Sunday after Christmas, Year B

The readings this week:

- *Isaiah 61:10-62:3* ◦ *Psalm 148*
- *Galatians 4:4-7* ◦ *Luke 2:22-40*



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

Worth the Wait

In a culture that has made efficiency a moral requirement and credit-card purchasing a way of life, delays are frustrating. Instant messaging, fast food meals and express deliveries reinforce a sense that waiting for almost anything is a waste of our time and a poor use of our gifts and resources. Orienting our lives around long-term commitments seems particularly risky and unnecessarily constraining. Accounts of fidelity under challenging circumstances puzzle us nearly as often as they inspire us.

In this context, it is difficult to make sense of the stories of Simeon and Anna in Luke 2. They seem so foreign to contemporary notions of lives well lived. Two people, at this point quite elderly, have spent inordinate amounts of time waiting, faithfully looking for the fulfillment of a single promise. What promise could possibly be so life-giving that we would shape our lives around it?

Anna's life choices seem particularly constrained. An entire adult life spent in prayer and fasting in the temple may have equipped her for high status in the ancient world, but to us such choices are nearly incomprehensible. Such a small scope for a life, so little productive activity -- how did she develop her gifts? Simeon fares a little better -- the text mentions three times that the Holy Spirit was at work -- but he too spent his life looking to the future.



Simeon and Anna were symbols of Israelite faithfulness and righteous aging. They trusted that fidelity would bear fruit, and they trusted for a very longtime. After the joyful testimony of the angels and shepherds at the birth of Jesus, it is Simeon and Anna who recognize him as the promised one. They had watched and waited for the Lord's Messiah, and one day they met him.

Simeon cradled the consolation of Israel in his arms. Satisfied to have seen the evidence of God's salvation in his lifetime, Simeon announced that he was now ready to die in peace. He had waited and the promise had been fulfilled. He praised God and proclaimed that the good news was for the whole world, then spoke complicated words of blessing over the baby and his parents. At the same time, Anna's decades of daily worship, her continual prayer and fasting, led her to burst into praise and testimony when she encountered the child. The text says that this woman "of a great age" spoke about him to many other people who also "were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

After years of waiting, Simeon and Anna were there, in the right place at the right time, to see God's promise fulfilled. Sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, Simeon was ready to welcome God's anointed one. Shaped by a lifetime of being present to God in worship, Anna recognized that the promise had arrived in the form of an infant being presented in the temple.

A posture of hope and fidelity structured their lives. They were righteous, devout and profoundly shaped by a story that was yet to be completed. The years of anticipation, waiting and looking were not wasted time, but time infused and transformed by intimations of the promise.

Simeon's words to Mary anticipate some of the complexity and costliness of the promise, but it is highly unlikely that he or Anna lived to see Jesus' adult ministry. Living on the other side of Jesus' death and resurrection, we have a more complete understanding of the story than Simeon or Anna could have had, and the story turned out to be both harder and more wonderful than they could have imagined. But what they knew shaped their lives and prepared them for a joyful, face-to-face encounter with the Messiah.

Simeon and the Anna invite reflection on whether what we know of the story of God's redemption shapes our lives in ways that keep us open and attentive to God's presence and present work. Perhaps it isn't a foolish waste of time to order our lives according to a story that is not yet complete. Perhaps living according to the promise of God locates us where we are most likely to regularly encounter the One who is life, fulfillment and freedom.

~ [Christine Pohl](#)

Reflecting on the Word



___ 1st Reading: [Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#)

Isaiah speaks of being “clothed with the garments of salvation.” This suggests that people who look at you can see your right relationship, or righteousness. Do you think people can see your righteousness? The prophet cannot keep silent about the salvation God has brought to the world. Can you keep silent about that salvation? What keeps you from sharing your faith? Who can you tell about your joy? [When God Tore Open the Heavens, Trinity Methodist Church](#)

“Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.”
~ Psalm 148:5

Unboxing Day

Boxes! When brightly wrapped sitting under a tree, they may bring us joy and delight! These gift boxes can reflect the love of family and friends. But not all “boxes” bring such obvious joy. If we feel “boxed in,” we feel caught, trapped, limited, labeled, or cut off. Who would want such a box?

Listen to the words in the text which indicate the box that Jesus agreed to enter into on our behalf: time, born of a woman, born under the law, slave, son, heir. Each of these expressions has a definition that somehow limits us—“boxes us in.”

Paul declares that Jesus Christ was sent by His Father precisely into our “boxed in” condition (incarnation) in order to redefine this experience (redeem). What we, before this, experienced as a “slave-status” with only limited rights, we now experience as “son/daughter status” with full rights—“beyond expectations.” The Spirit of Jesus has transformed our “box” so that what was given us in our baptism enables us to shed our sin-soiled garments identifying us as prisoners and to be reclothed in the garment of a forgiven child of God.

Our particular “boxes” may be different on the outside, but on the inside we are all in our own “box” (cancer, financial debt, marriage and family difficulties, school tensions, dementia, chronic pain, house infested with toxic mold, etc.). The Jesus of Christmas has joined us in our box and transformed it by His presence. Wow!

Praying Toward Sunday

Come, Lord Jesus! Come with Your Holy Spirit and transform our hearts and minds, so that every ‘box,’ even a smelly manger, becomes a foretaste of ‘paradise.’ Thank You for being in this box *with us* until that final day when You call us out of the box of this life and into our heavenly home, where all that challenges and burdens us is stripped away.

Pastor Ted Jungkuntz

___ Psalm Reading: [Psalm 148](#)

This psalm divides into two six-verse stanzas (vv. 1-6 and 7-12), with a recap that underscores the motivation to praise (vv. 13-14). What two major chorus groups are appealed to here? Within those two major choral divisions, who joins in praising God? Do you see this as mere figurative (symbolic or exaggerated) language used by the psalmist to call all things in heaven and on earth, or is there some way that all the various elements actually praise God? Why praise God at all? What is the closest you have come, this side of heaven, to experiencing a worldwide worship service such as this psalm announces? How does this psalm provide a new or fresh picture of praise for you? [Quiet Time Bible Study, InterVarsity Press](#)

___ 3rd Reading: [Galatians 4:4-7](#)

Why are we no longer slaves but children of God? What did God do for us that made this true? Did God send the same “Spirit of his Son into our hearts” that he sent to Mary when she conceived Jesus? How does this Spirit “ransom those under the law”? According to St. Paul, was the Spirit sent to the heart or mind? [The Center for Liturgy](#)

___ 4th Reading: [Luke 2:22-40](#)

Look carefully at how Simeon is described in verse 25. Do you know anyone like this, who seems to have “the Holy Spirit resting on” them? What makes them special? How is Anna described in verses 36-37? Do you know anyone who is very godly and seems to worship God with genuine power? Have you encountered Jesus in such a way that would make you want to tell others about him? What characterizes those who genuinely seek Jesus? What do they seem to do as soon as they encounter him? How do the examples of these two people help you as you think about living your life meaningfully? [InterVarsity Christian Fellowship of the USA](#)