

Theme: Seeking Christ in Christmas
“Simeon and Anna with the Christ Child”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – based on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton
December 14-15, 2013 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

Luke 2:22-33 and 36-38

22 Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. 23 The law of the Lord says, “If a woman’s first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the Lord.” 24 So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord—“either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

25 At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him 26 and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, 28 Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 “Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. 30 I have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared for all people. 32 He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!”

33 Jesus’ parents were amazed at what was being said about him.

36 Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. 37 Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. 38 She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.

VIDEO Seeking Christ in Christmas Week 3 Sermon Starter

SLIDE Simeon and Anna with the Christ Child

I want to invite you to take out of your bulletin your Message Notes and your Meditation Moments. In your bulletin each week you have this sheet of paper folded in half and at the top you will find a Scripture passage we are using

for today and below that there are some blank lines where you can write the things down that you hear today that you might want to remember. Our hope is that you might hear something each week you'll want to remember in the days ahead and there is a place for you to write those things down.

Below that you will find daily Scripture readings which tie back into the message we have for the day. This week you will mostly be reading the passage we have before us today. We will give you background material that will help you better understand it and apply it to your life. You can download this resource off of our website if you are watching at home or online. We also have separate devotional books for the season of Advent in the back on the usher tables that you can get as you leave if you would like one of those.

Today we continue in a series of sermons we have been doing for this season of Advent, which is the four weeks before we get to Christmas. We have been working our way backwards to the birth of Jesus so instead of starting before Christ was born we are actually starting after Jesus was born. We are working our way back chronologically tonight when Jesus came into the world which we celebrate on Christmas Eve. We started two weeks ago with the story of King Herod the great and his murderous search for the Christ child. We don't know exactly when that happened but it could've happened as far back as two years after Jesus was born. Somewhere between two years and 40 days is when we know that event took place.

Last week we focused on the wise men. We know that they came to Jerusalem and were the ones who notified King Herod that a child was born who would be, "King of the Jews." They saw the Christ child perhaps a day or two days before King Herod began searching for him. Even though you have the Magi or the wise men in your Nativity scene, as though they showed up on the day that Jesus was born, we know that they were there somewhere between 40 days and two years after the birth of Jesus.

Today we turn our attention to the moment when Mary and Joseph brought their baby to the Temple in Jerusalem. They were offering a sacrifice for purification for Mary. We know exactly when this happened because the Scriptures tell us very clearly when the sacrifice was supposed to be offered by each Jewish family. Luke begins his story with these words in chapter 2.

SLIDE 22 Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. 23 The law of the Lord

says, “If a woman’s first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the Lord.”

Luke is referring to the Jewish law found in the book of Leviticus 12:3 – 8 where we read that after a woman gave birth she was ritually unclean and she had to wait for 40 days if she had a boy child. At the 40th day she was to go to the tabernacle or the Temple in Jerusalem and make a sacrifice in order to become ritually pure. This means that Jesus was just under six weeks old.

Leviticus also tells us that when a woman comes to make this sacrifice for her ritual purification, she was required to present an offering of sacrifice to the priest. This offering was given to God and it was supposed to be a lamb and a small bird, which was to be a turtledove or a pigeon. But Leviticus also says that if a woman is poor she can offer to pigeons or two turtledoves and no lamb. Luke tells us this about Mary and Joseph and their sacrifice in the next verse of the text.

SLIDE 24 So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord—“either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

What does this tell us about Mary and Joseph? It tells us that they were poor. The fact that they came on the 40th day to the Temple tells us that they were devout in their Jewish faith. We know that they were devout and that they were poor and they brought a small box with two tiny turtledoves to present to God for Mary's purification.

This scene takes place in the Temple courts. As you entered the Temple courts in Jerusalem there would have been hundreds of people, perhaps thousands, moving about preparing for different rituals and offerings and sacrifices. If you go today to that region, the Temple courts will look like this.

VIDEO Temple Mount Clip (no audio – Jeff will narrate)

Where the Temple once stood is now the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. In the day of Jesus, however, the Temple looked like this image that you see on the video screen. The Temple courts are on the right and the left as you see in this model of the Temple from the first century. It was in those Temple courts which Mary and Joseph and the Christ child would've been walking with many other people. There were probably many other young couples doing exactly what Mary and Joseph were doing that day because they had children themselves 40 days earlier. Others may have been offering Thanks Offerings or Guilt Offerings to God on that day.

SLIDE Temple Model (graphic)

As they walked into the Temple with their child and their little box of birds, an elderly gentleman approached them. He stops them in their tracks and he looks at the child and he begins to proclaim that this child was the Messiah.

A short time after that, as they were looking for the priest for the ritual of purification, an elderly woman approached them. She also looked at the child and proclaimed that he was the Messiah of God.

These events amazed and astounded Mary and Joseph. Today we want to ask: **What do the stories of Simeon and Anna tell us about God's will for our lives?**

SLIDE Simeon with Mary Joseph and Jesus (graphic)

Let's start with Simeon. It's implied that Simeon is an older man as he comes to see the Christ child. The tradition in the second century was that he was 112 years old. We don't know exactly how old he was, but by the second century the church pictured him as a very old man. Let's say he was 85 or 90 even. At this point in his life he would have witnessed a lot of important history in Judah. Luke tells us this about Simeon.

SLIDE 25 At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him 26 and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

This was a man who was waiting for the comforting and the rescue of Israel. This idea comes from Isaiah 40 when the Israelites had been taken to Babylon as slaves and their nation had been destroyed in 586 BC. God said to the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people." God promises to bring them back from slavery someday in Babylon and into the Promised Land.

In the days leading up to the birth of Jesus the Jewish people had looked to those Scriptures and anticipated that God would once more save them. They believed that God would save them from the Romans and from King Herod the great. This passage from Isaiah came to be applied to the hope that a Messiah would be born who would be a new King that would rule with justice and righteousness. This King would shepherd his people and comfort them in their struggles and sorrow.

Simeon, as an old man, had lived through much tumultuous history for the Jewish people. He was alive when the Roman Empire took control of Judah which was in 63 BC. Since Jesus was born in six BC Simeon was probably an older man when he witnessed Roman forces coming in to Jerusalem and taking over. Before that Israel had been an independent kingdom for more than 100 years. The Roman soldiers were enforcing the Pax Romana as well as confiscating the income of the people for Roman taxation.

Simeon was also alive to witness the Civil War which took place when King Herod and his Roman forces took on King Antigonus around 40 BC. King Herod took control around 37 BC and Simeon saw the bloodshed as King Herod ruled brutally, as we learned last few weeks. He was a tyrant over his people and this whole time Simeon is praying, "God, please deliver us. Please save us from the tyranny under which we are living. Please raise up the King once more who will rule with righteousness and justice. God, we desperately long for a King who will rule with righteousness and justice. Help us to be a light to the Gentiles. God, please do these things in my lifetime."

Day after day, Simeon would pray this same prayer, hoping and longing for God's deliverance. We know that Simeon's prayer was not answered for 50 years. The first thing that we should notice about Simeon is that he prayed this prayer every single day, but he never saw the answer to that prayer until the end of his life, and yet he still trusted in God. **We call that faith.**

SLIDE The Faith of Simeon (use "Simeon with Mary Joseph and Jesus" graphic on top of this slide)

Faith is when we know that someday God will do something but we may not live to see happen. We still trust in God no matter what and the truth is that this is contrary to how many of us live and act out our faith.

Many times we find ourselves praying for something and after week, if it doesn't happen, we get disappointed in God and discouraged. Maybe we pray for a month and we get disappointed with God. Maybe we pray for a year and we get disappointed with God. Simeon pray for at least 57 years and part of his prayer was, "God, I know I might not live to see this, but God I know that you promised that you will do this. I am trusting that you will and holding on to say in the midst of this unanswered prayer."

Maybe you remember this great definition of faith that we find in Hebrews 11:1 where we read these words. Some of you may have memorized these words

at some point in your walk of faith.

SLIDE 1 Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see.

Faith is what sustains you when you walk through really dark times. When you are living with darkness and despair, faith is the only thing we have to hold onto sometimes.

I think of the older gentleman in my last church who shared with me once during the Christmas season how hard it was, as a young man, when his wife died and left him with three young children. He talked about how challenging the first Christmas was without his wife and his children not having their mother. He talked about having to continue to trust that God would dispel the grief and bring joy once more into their lives someday. This gentleman became a Stephen Minister for that congregation and every Christmas he would seek out those who had lost a spouse that year and encourage them. He had ministered to several younger people who lost their spouses, just like he had, and he would share how his children struggled. He would also share with them how God carried each of them through those dark times, especially around the holidays.

He then would talk about how the dark clouds eventually were dispelled and how much joy there was in his family now that his children would return home with their children during the holidays. They still remember their mother whom they lost around the holidays so many years ago, but now they feel joy again and can celebrate the gift of life that was begun by their mother. They couldn't see it for a long time, but they simply had to trust that it would happen.

The very last sermon that Dr. Martin Luther King preached was the "Mountaintop" speech. The next day he would be assassinated but in her sermon that evening he preached those powerful words, ***"I have been to the mountaintop and I've seen the other side. I have seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. I'm not worried about tonight. I'm not worried about anything...mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"***

Martin Luther King Jr. knew this would happen and we call that faith. For some of you right now, that is all that sustains you. I visited recently with someone who has been looking for a job for over two years and he told me that sometimes he feels like giving up. He needs to be reminded constantly to trust. He keeps getting up and putting his clothes on for one more day and walking with

God knowing that someday, even if it's not next week or next month or the month after that, he will have a job again. Someday his life will return to a semblance of normal and God promises to walk with you through that. We call that faith, which is what Simeon had as he prayed for 57 years.

Somewhere along the way, God whispered to Simeon, "Don't worry. You will live to see the salvation of Israel coming." Simeon didn't know what that meant but he just knew that God promised him that someday he would actually see this happen. So here he is as an old man, most likely in his 90s, and Mary and Joseph walked into the Temple courts with the baby in their arms. Simeon just happens to be there.

How did Simeon just happen to be there that day? He might've said, "God, I'm 90 years old. Do I really need to go the Temple today?" He didn't do that however, he showed up at the Temple courts just like he had done every day for the past 57 years. Among all the other young couples walking into the Temple courts he somehow identified this couple, Mary and Joseph. He hadn't anticipated that he would meet the Messiah as a baby, but somehow he knew inside that this child was the one. How do you know that this was a child? There were no angels who told him, so how did he figure it out? Luke tells us what happens.

SLIDE 27 That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, 28 Simeon was there.

This passage tells us that Simeon was a man who listened to the nudges of the Holy Spirit. We believe as Christians that God's Holy Spirit dwells within us and that God still speaks to us today, not just to people like Simeon. We believe the Holy Spirit speaks to all of us if we will listen and pay attention. The problem is that we are usually so busy that we don't pay attention. We have so much noise in our lives that we can't hear.

Several times a week I feel this nudging from the Holy Spirit but I wonder how many times I have missed because I was too busy and not paying attention. Something told Simeon, "You need to go to the Temple today." Instead of saying, "Lord, my knees hurt. My feet hurt. My back is weary so maybe I can go tomorrow."

Can you imagine if the man who had prayed for 57 years to see the Messiah had decided to sleep in that day and not show up when he heard the nudging of the Holy Spirit what he would've missed out on? One of the important lessons to

learn from this passage is that the Holy Spirit is at work and gives us nudges, I believe, on a daily basis in the midst of our ordinary day-to-day lives. Twice in this passage Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit led Simeon as a way of saying to his readers, "And the Holy Spirit speaks to you if you will listen."

This last week I was at the recreation center and I was going to play basketball around noon. Nobody showed up to play basketball so I decided that I would take a swim instead. As I was walking in the locker room a man pulled me aside and said, "Hey, you're the pastor at the Methodist Church, right?"

I would hesitate to answer that question because I never know what's coming next, and I was kind of in a hurry to get my swim in so I could sit in the hot tub and then get back to the office for a meeting. But I felt this nudging tell me that I should go ahead and admit that I was the pastor of the First United Methodist Church to this young man and so I did! He said he had been to our church for the first time last weekend and that many of you made him feel welcome and he was very thankful for that. He said the sermon was okay and that in the middle of the sermon, he realized something about the wise men in the Christmas story that he had never noticed before. I was just glad he remembered that I had preached on the wise men to tell you the truth! That shows you how self-centered I can be even as your pastor!

He shook me out of my self-absorption when he said, "You know, those wise men took that journey and they had no idea what they were going to find at the end. They just went with nothing but hope and faith. That really encouraged me to know that sometimes I may not know where the journey is going to end up, but I should just have faith and trust that God will take me where I need to go when it's all said and done."

I thought about his comment the rest of the day and how that moment changed my day, and in some ways, the rest of my week. And now, that moment may have even touched you, all because I heard God tell me to slow down and listen and pay attention and I actually did it for once!

Do you slow down and pay attention? I'm pretty sure that every single day there are moments when God is nudging us, whispering to us, and if we will pay attention, we can find ourselves right in the middle of something that God is doing. We will find there is somebody who needs us to listen and pay attention. We will find that there is somebody that God wants to have speak into our lives if we will simply stop and listen. We will find ourselves in just the right place at just the right time for what God wants us to see and experience if we are paying

attention to the nudges.

This is what happened for Simeon as he paid attention that day. He made no excuses. He felt like God wanted him to go to the Temple and so he got up, got dressed, and walked, what was most likely an hour long trip, to the Temple courts. While he was there he saw a young couple come in with their box which contained an offering of birds and their young child. He heard the voice say to him clearly, "This is the couple. This is a child."

He approached the couple and announced that this is the long-awaited Messiah. He took the baby in his arms and do you know what he must've felt in that moment? I looked for paintings and pictures that might capture this.

SLIDE Simeon and Jesus (graphic)

I came across this painting by Ray DiCianni. As you look at this painting, what do you think Simeon was feeling? Here he is holding this child that he has prayed for for over the last 57 years and I picture him crying out, "God, thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you for hearing my prayers and for sending this child to redeem and comfort Israel."

I see pure joy on his face in this painting. This is what can happen as we pay attention to the nudges of the Holy Spirit when God speaks.

Immediately after Simeon announces who this child will be, he prays this prayer that we find in Luke's gospel account.

SLIDE He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. 30 I have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared for all people. 32 He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"

This prayer is typically called the *Nunc dimittis* which in Latin means, "dismiss me now." This prayer is also called the Song of Simeon or the Canticle of Simeon. It was often used as the closing song in Christian over the last two centuries.

In the medieval times this was seen as the prayer of the believer before they die, "I have seen God's salvation, so now you can take me, Lord. I'm ready to go."

What is interesting is that Simeon had not seen the Christ child grow up at this point. He hadn't heard a word uttered from the lips of Jesus and he didn't see

any of the miracles. He didn't know that one day Jesus would die on the cross, be buried, and on the third day be raised from the dead. He couldn't see any of that, but he did know that God promised someone would deliver God's people and he believed that this was the Messiah, however God would work it out. Once more we see an act of faith from Simeon.

One of the other things this story says to us is that most of us will not see all of the promises of God fulfilled. The Scriptures do tell us that a day will come when the kingdoms of this Earth will become the kingdom of our God and of Christ, and he will reign forever and ever. There will be no more suffering or sorrow or pain or tears. The old will pass away and the new will come. There will be no more death and evil will be banished. We may not live to see that, but we have seen Christ and that will be enough, because we know that because we have seen him, one day these things will happen and so we trust. This is called living by faith which is exactly what Simeon did.

After this interaction, Simeon walks off praising God and we read:

SLIDE 33 Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about him.

They continue through the Temple courts looking for the priest to which they bring their offering and they are stopped by another elderly saint in the Temple named Anna. We read this about her in Luke's gospel.

SLIDE 36 Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. 37 Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. 38 She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem.

SLIDE Anna and the Christ Child (graphic)

This text tells us that Anna is 84 years old but the Greek is a bit ambiguous. Some read it that she was married for seven years and then she was a widow for 84 years. This means that if she was married at the age of 12 or 13 she might have been 20 years old when she became a widow. You add that 84 years and you get a woman who was 104 years old. We don't know for sure, but we do know that she is much older than most women who lived in the first century. The life

expectancy for a woman was around 30 years because many people died of childhood diseases and many young women died in childbirth.

There were not a lot of elderly people during this time of the first century and so we are meant to see her as a saint who has experienced much in life. We know that she is a widow so she has experienced pain and disappointment. It appears that she never remarried after her husband died and she never had children. Some people who have experienced such bitter moments in their lives may have turned away from God in the anger and the pain. Anna didn't do that however, and instead of turning away from God, she turned towards God. Eventually she came to live in the Temple courts and it was there that she blessed others by encouraging and praying for them. She fasted and worshipped God in the Temple, making herself available to be used by God.

Anna happened to be out in the Temple courtyards at the moment when Mary and Joseph were meeting Simeon. She might have missed them. She could have been going to use the restroom or eating a meal. She might have been visiting with someone else, but instead she is a part of this chance encounter. How is it that she happens to be there at just the right time? My sense is that she was also led by the spirit and felt a nudge and responded. She was right where she needed to be in that moment. Of all of the families with little children who are coming to the Temple, that day her eyes became focused on this couple and their encounter with Simeon. She also saw in this child the redemption of Jerusalem.

SLIDE Anna and Jesus (graphic)

Notice that Luke calls her a prophet. This is very interesting because this word is only used twice in the New Testament to describe a woman. Both times it is used by Luke. It is used here and also in the book of Acts describing Phillip's daughters as prophetesses.

A prophet is an Oracle of God, or someone who speaks the truth of God on behalf of God to God's people. This is a profound thing to say about a woman in the first century. One thing to note is that Luke's gospel is filled with pictures of women being elevated in the ministry of Jesus. Only Luke tells us that women financially supported Jesus and the disciples. Many of the stories of the role of women in Jesus' life are recounted by Luke, including the role of the very first person to proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah publicly, who is the Samaritan woman at the well.

You might know or remember that Luke is Paul's friend. Paul and Luke were traveling companions on their missionary journeys. The gospel of Luke was probably written 10 years after Paul was put to death by the Romans. I don't know this is absolutely true, but one thing that some scholars postulate is that Luke has a particular reason for placing a strong emphasis on the role of women in his gospel. Why would he dare call Anna a prophet?

Some scholars believe that Luke loved Paul and he also knew that twice in Paul's letters, Paul says things about women that are not very helpful for women in the church in leadership. Paul said that women should keep silent in the church and he said he doesn't permit women to teach. There were very specific historical reasons why he gave those admonitions and the circumstances in which he gave them to two of his churches. Luke may have been trying to offer a counterbalance to what his friend Paul had said by lifting up the roles that women played and make it clear how important they were in the ministry of Jesus, especially this woman who was at the birth of Jesus who recall the prophet of God.

You know there are churches here in Durango where women are not allowed to serve as elders or leaders. There are some churches where women can't even be ushers. I'm so grateful that this church takes seriously what Luke's gospel proclaims, that God speaks through women and men. We affirm and welcome and praise God for our female pastors and leaders throughout this congregation and denomination. I believe we are a stronger church because of it and I know in my own life that several women pastors have spoken in profound ways. I am grateful that we have this story of Anna to encourage us from the very beginning of the life of Jesus.

I think one of the main takeaways from this story for us today is to recognize through the story of Simeon and Anna that God values the ministry of older saints. We live in a society which often values youth. The prime demographic for advertisers is the 18 to 35-year-old age group because our culture is constantly trying to reach out to youth and young people. We recognize in this story that God also values older adults and God places a value on those that society often tells us are all used up. God says, "They are not all used up. They are actually people I can really use!"

We remember that Abraham and Sarah were past childbearing age and in their older years when God called them to be the father and mother of the nation of Israel. Moses was older when God called him out of the wilderness and back to Egypt to deliver his message to the Pharaoh. Elizabeth and Zachariah, the parents

of John the Baptist, were an older couple. Why do you think God calls these persons who were older to this kind of ministry? I think God recognizes that as we get older we have less to lose and we sometimes are even more open to God using us because we have time and resources.

More importantly, those of you who are older in this congregation have wisdom. You slow down and you pay attention and you listen. As young people we are often so busy and so immersed in the noise of the world we can't hear, but as we age we learn to make ourselves available to God and bring about God's kingdom in ways that we sometimes miss when we were younger.

Why do you think that God uses this elderly pair of Simeon and Anna to announce to the world that Jesus is the Messiah? There is something about respecting and valuing the older saints that we find in this story. Part of it is their availability and willingness to be present and part of it is the way they look at the world.

I think of the older woman who went to see the doctor and as she stepped to the receptionist desk, the nurse asked her, "Mary, have you eaten anything today?"

Mary said, "Well yes, of course I have. I had breakfast this morning."

The nurse asked, "What time is that?"

Mary responded, "4:30."

The woman at the desk said, "4:30 a.m.! You ate breakfast at 4:30 in the morning?"

Mary replied, "Honey, at my age you just can't afford to miss anything. You have to get up early and get started."

Mary had a clear sense of not knowing how many days she had left and so she was going to pay attention and get going. She wasn't going to burn daylight but was going to get up and get moving because she had things to see and places where God would use her. That's we see in Simeon and Anna.

We don't really know what she said, but Luke tells us that Anna began to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. She couldn't help but tell other people about what she has seen. She can't stop herself. She has seen the one who would bring the redemption of Jerusalem. How could she not tell people that?

You see the One who came because God so loved the world. How can you not tell people about that? How can you not tell them that God actually knows their name and loves them? How can you not tell people who have really experienced brokenness and hurt in their lives, sometimes because of their own doing and sometimes just because of life, that God is the God of the second chance and He sent a Redeemer to save us? How can we not tell people that they are never really alone because Emmanuelle has come, God with us? How can you keep that to yourself if you know this to be true?

Anna couldn't keep it to herself. She had to tell somebody, anybody, who was looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. This is how the gospel is spread in the world, because people have to tell somebody about this thing that changes their life. It's not just up to the preachers to spread the good news but it is up to all of us to be the presence of Jesus Christ the world. God says, "I need you to tell somebody. I need you to tell somebody because when you tell them, your faith grows. I need you to tell somebody because when you tell them, they trust you and they might actually come and listen."

Let me ask you a rhetorical question. How many of you today are followers of Jesus because somebody told you about him? Somebody had to tell you, even if that was your mom or your dad or your grandparents or a Sunday school teacher or a Bible camp counselor. Somebody talked to each of us about this and that is how it works and how the gospel is shared, from person-to-person.

I know that some of you have had people try to tell you about Jesus and it felt icky. It was unpleasant and it didn't feel good. The truth is that it doesn't have to be that way. What you have that nobody else has is your story and it is not icky or weird or strange. You are an expert on that story because it is yours, and the main way that the gospel is spread is when we share our own story of what God has done in our lives and how much our faith in Jesus Christ means to us. You might even simply share that you go to this Methodist Church down the road and it changed your life, if it truly has done that. I know it seems hard but the truth is it's about really caring about people and not just about putting another notch on your Bible.

This last year the Southern Baptists released a study in which they asked thousands of Americans what their perception was of Southern Baptists. They didn't just want to find out about Southern Baptists and so they also thought they would find out about Methodists and Catholics and Mormons and Muslims. They asked about these five groups in every geographical region across the country and

with every demographic. They asked simply, **"Is your opinion of this group highly favorable, favorable, neutral, slightly negative or very negative?"**

I'm not going to tell you what they found out about the other four groups, but I was pleasantly surprised to hear that the group that had the highest favorable rating among all Americans was... Who do you think? It was the Methodists.

Do you know who the group was which had the lowest negative perception? It was the Methodists.

62% of Americans across all demographics said, "I have a favorable or highly favorable of Methodist." 23% said they had a not so favorable view of Methodists and 16% said they did know enough about Methodists to give an opinion. If you set aside those who don't know enough about Methodists to give an opinion, what you discover is that for every one person who has a not so favorable view of Methodists, three people have a positive perception of Methodists.

70% of the people who live around this congregation don't go to church. Do you think they would benefit from knowing that God walks with them no matter how dark things are? Do you think they would benefit from knowing that there is always hope, or that the worst thing in life is never the last thing in life, or that when we die we have a building not made by human hands but eternal in the heavens? Do you think they would benefit from any of those things?

If you think they might, and you know somebody you care about, the chances are actually pretty good that they might come with you to church. For every person who might turn you down there are three who might say, "Really, you're a Methodist? I've heard good things about them." They would probably come if you were willing to ask.

When you are nudged by the Holy Spirit, and you share with someone you care about something that is important to you, what you will find is joy in your own heart. You get to be a part of what God is doing that can change someone else's life.

I was visiting with a friend of mine who is a pastor and had been appointed to a new church. She told me about visiting her oldest member who is 107 years old in the nursing home. The woman was blind and when my friend got to her room she introduced herself as the new pastor at the United Methodist Church. The older woman put her finger in the pastor's chest and said, "Let me tell you

about Jesus."

She proceeded to tell her pastor about her relationship with Jesus and how Jesus had sustained her for her entire life. She was a woman of great and remarkable faith. A few weeks later the pastor was at a different nursing home and she was telling this story to a group of women all who were more than 90 years old. One of the women took her hand and she began to cry and she said to her pastor, "I am 90 years old and I have never told anybody about Jesus. My body is breaking down and I will never leave the nursing home and I've never told a single person about how much Jesus has meant to me and my life."

The Holy Spirit nudged my friend and she said, "I'm here. Why don't you tell me about Jesus?"

The older woman stopped crying and her face lit up and filled with joy as she began to talk about something she had never told anyone, which is what Jesus was to her.

I hope and pray that you are not 90 years old and in the nursing home before you finally tell somebody about who Jesus is for you. When you tell somebody who Jesus is for you, you will find your own life is filled with joy, and you have the opportunity to give joy as a gift to someone else.

Simeon was listening for the nudges of the Holy Spirit and Anna recognized that you just can't keep good news to yourself. This is the invitation from the Scripture teaching us today as we look at this story about the birth of Jesus. Listen for the nudges and pay attention to the Holy Spirit and be open to sharing the good news of great joy that a Comforter and Savior has come.

Let's pray. While your heads are bowed and your eyes are closed I'm going to invite you to pray in the quiet and you might pray something like this.

SLIDE Prayer

Lord, help me to slow down and pay attention and listen for your Holy Spirit.

You might simply say to the Holy Spirit something like this...

Holy Spirit, please guide my life.

My hunch is that every single one of us can think about somebody that we care deeply about who doesn't go to church, who needs Jesus Christ and they may not even know it or understand it. Would you simply name them before God and

then you might say something like this...

Please use me to share Jesus with them...

Thank you oh God for the stories of Simeon and Anna and the way they speak to us today. I pray thee would help us as a congregation to listen for the nudges of your Holy Spirit, to find the joy that comes when we have paid attention to those nudges, to trust in you no matter what our circumstances might be and finally that you would use us to be your witnesses and share the good news of Jesus Christ. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

“Simeon and Anna with the Christ Child”

Theme: Seeking Christ in Christmas

Scripture: Luke 2:22-38

Things I’d like to remember from today’s sermon:

Meditation Moments for Monday, December 16 – Read Luke 2:21-24 – Like all pious Jews, Jesus’ earthly parents carefully carried out the provisions of the Law of Moses. Specifically, after eight days (as called for in Leviticus 12), they circumcised Jesus (which, like baptism today, was a sign that he belonged to God). Thirty-three days later, in Jerusalem, they offered a sacrifice that the law allowed the poor to present (Lev. 12:8).

- When Jesus grew up, he showed how empty many people’s keeping of the religious rituals of the Hebrew faith had become (see e.g. Mark 7:1-13). Yet his parents’ obedience seems to have been sincere and whole-hearted. Which faith rituals hold meaning for you? How can we keep church rituals from becoming empty forms?
- One touching part of Leviticus 12 was that it gave an option for those who couldn’t afford a lamb to sacrifice, showing God’s love for the poor as well as the rich. How is God’s love helping you live in a place of “abundance,” whatever the state of your finances? What are some ways your church can honor all worshippers, whatever their means?

Tuesday, December 17 – Read Psalm 92:12-15, Proverbs 16:31-32 – In Biblical times, people who lived long lives for God were greatly valued. Grey hair was called “a crown of glory” and a sign of much wisdom. These mature adults had, among other lessons, learned the value of patience and self-control for living life wisely. God often called these wise ones (including Simeon and Anna) to action.

- In our society, older adults (who have given much of their lives to serve God and others) are not always valued. What are some ways churches can empower the “wise ones” among their members to serve (“bear fruit for”) God today? Whatever your age, how can you set aside biases based on age, and value all the members of God’s family?
- Patience and self-control are valuable qualities at every stage of life. They help us keep our integrity intact and our witness strong. If you are older, how can you offer wisdom and help to others, humbly sharing important lessons you’ve learned on your journey? If you’re younger, how can you show openness to learn from those who are older?

Wednesday, December 18 – Read Luke 2:25-27 – Simeon was “led by the Spirit” to the Temple area. The text implies that the Spirit must have also led him to Mary, Joseph and their infant son rather than to any other parents who brought infants to the Temple that day. For Simeon, this was a “dream come true.” Luke said God had promised Simeon that he would see God’s anointed one, the Messiah.

- Simeon “eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel,” even though the mighty Roman army firmly controlled Judea, and Israel’s religious leaders quarreled and were at times corrupt. How can you nurture a sense of “eager anticipation” about what God is doing today, and about Christ’s return to fully establish his Kingdom?
- Verse 27: “Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area.” In the Christian faith, we talk about the importance of being attuned to the “inner nudges” God sends us through the Spirit. In what ways have you sensed the Holy Spirit’s leading in your life? How can you distinguish between the Spirit’s “nudges” and other impulses you may have?

Thursday, December 19 – Read Luke 2:28-35 – If Mary was like most young mothers, she must have felt a little uneasy as this elderly man, probably a stranger, took her baby in his arms. Simeon amazed her by saying Jesus was a savior for “all peoples,” even Gentiles (verses 31-32). And he warned her that her “blessed” lot would not always be easy: “a sword will pierce your innermost being too” (verse 35).

- Holding the infant Jesus, Simeon said to God, “My eyes have seen your salvation ... It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel.” How was Jesus, even as an infant who hadn’t done anything “saving” yet, “God’s salvation”? How could Simeon’s Spirit-prompted look ahead have strengthened Mary and Joseph’s faith?
- “God’s salvation” was here—but Simeon’s joy (guided by the Spirit) was not naïve. He knew many people and forces would resist God’s kingdom, and he warned Mary that that would cause her pain. What helps you trust God and live out God’s purposes when it’s not easy or popular? Has following God brought you any kind of pain?

Friday, December 20 – Read Isaiah 49:5-13 – Like most of the songs of praise at Jesus’ birth, Simeon’s words in Luke 2:28-35 had their roots deep in the Hebrew Scriptures. In today’s passage, the prophet Isaiah said “God’s servant” would restore not only Israel (which was in exile), but all the nations, to a proper relationship with God. The New

Testament church always saw Jesus’ saving work in those words.

- Isaiah 49 is one of four “Servant Songs” (along with Isaiah 42, 46, and 53). Luke’s careful research (Luke 1:1-4) said Simeon may well have been the first person to apply verse 6 to Jesus. How did this expand people’s image of the Messiah beyond being a savior just for the Jewish nation? How can we help extend God’s salvation to all nations?
- In verse 13, Isaiah wrote, “The LORD has comforted his people, and taken pity on those who suffer.” His first readers thought of God’s power bringing Israel home from exile in Babylon. For Simeon, the verse said God had comforted and taken pity by sending Jesus as the Savior. In what ways does God calm and comfort you when you need it?

Saturday, December 21 – Read Luke 2:36-38 – To the story of Simeon’s witness to Jesus, Luke added a record of Anna’s prophecy about the infant Christ. He didn’t record her exact words when she “gave thanks to God and spoke about the child” (verse 38), but her testimony was clearly important to Mary and Joseph. Because of her devotion to God and the time she spent in the Temple, she would have been able to share her words regarding Jesus with many of the worshipers there.

- This passage doesn’t say how old Anna was when her husband died. Women in that day typically married in their early teens, so she had probably been constantly in the temple for around sixty years. It might seem a stretch to “worship night and day” (verse 37). How can your time spent praying, studying the Bible, and worshipping God shape what you do with the rest of your time, with how you live your life? How can your worship fill you with the same confidence and eager anticipation that it gave Simeon and Anna?

Family Activity: As a family, discuss the fact that God sent Jesus to earth to share his love with us. Many people cared for and loved Jesus and he loved and cared for others. Why not widen your circle of family and friends by sharing love with others? Consider inviting someone over for a simple dinner or dessert. Interview an older couple or person, asking about their traditions and what is meaningful to them about Christmas. Offer to care for the children of a single parent or an overwhelmed couple. Build relationships with people of different ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Share the love of Jesus this season and always.