

Gospel lesson

Today we hear about Mary's first visit to the temple in Jerusalem as a young mother, and the fuss made over her baby.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/simeon-anna-temple/>;
credit: LUMO

Luke 2:22-40 (NRSV)

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord

²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"),

²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple;

and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law,

²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;

³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed

³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,

³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with

fasting and prayer night and day.

³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

The word of God for the people of God

<Hymn “Carol of the Epiphany”

TFWS #2094>

<Anna portrayal>



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/simeon-anna-temple/>;
credit: LUMO

Hello. I am Anna, daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. I had a husband in my youth, but after seven short years of marriage, he died, leaving me with only my faith for consolation, to watch and wait for what the Lord had in store.

Since then, I have lived at the temple, worshipping the Almighty with fasting and prayers, and helping out in whatever ways I might be of use. I cannot physically do as much now as in my younger days, but

over the years I have observed much and gained wisdom from meditating on the Lord. Now I am an instrument of holy advice, particularly for women who come to the temple with one or more of the variety of distinctly feminine concerns.

I have seen and heard of so many challenges the women in our community face, it would break your heart. I have prayed every day:

- † for the poor to have enough to eat;
- † for the sick and unclean to be healed and purified, that they may again join our community worship;
- † for beaten wives to be safe from violence, for their husbands to have gentled hearts;
- † for women to be safe from unrighteous men;
- † for the disgraced to find honor again, that they may not be ostracized nor left vulnerable to attack and with nothing but sorrow in their bellies;
- † for consolation of the mourning in the face of loss - so many losses over the years!;
- † for the foolish to understand better what they should do and why - and then have the heart to do it, especially when it affects their children!; and
- † for relief from oppression by foreigners, that we can once again be seen by the world as God's Chosen people - that by our prosperity, all people may be drawn to worship the One who blesses us.

There are so many needs, it would take the hand of God in our community to set things right. I also prayed that I might see such a day, a day when the Messiah would come among us, to confront sinners and restore us to the people we should be – and now, my prayer has been answered!

It was a normal day in the temple, not festival time, when a young couple arrived with their infant son for the young mother's blood purification offering. They were not wealthy; they could only afford the pair of doves instead of a lamb.

Simeon saw them first. It is well known that the Spirit of God told Simeon he would see the Messiah before he died, so when he started gushing praises to God over the month-old infant, I had to see Him too.

It was the Messiah, among us at last! I could feel the Holy presence in Him and praised God that He was coming to bring salvation, *shalom* with justice, to our people. Yet His parents did not seem to understand why we were so excited about their son.

Even more astonishing was what I learned when Mary spoke with me privately, for advice. She was nervous about now needing to fulfill wifely duties with Joseph, because – for so she claimed – she had never been with a man! I asked her how she got pregnant in

the first place, and she told me she had been visited by an angel who foretold the baby's birth!

I found out later that the young mother was related to old Zechariah, that priest who went mute a couple of years ago when making an offering in the Holy of Holies. There were stories of angels speaking to him, to Mary, to her husband, and even to shepherds about this baby. It left me wondering, after all those holy visits, how could they be so obtuse about their son?

I think it must be something like the way women forget the pain of childbirth in the joy of having children. After all, the life of the Messiah will not be easy - no one likes being held accountable for the things they do knowing they should not be doing them. I fear young Mary is bound for cruel heartbreak.

I did not tell the young mother about that fear, though; she had enough on her mind. I reassured her about her wifely duties, prayed with her, and blessed her wonderful child with great thanksgiving to God.

We who have been waiting and watching have seen the Great Light! Now comes our preparation for the restoration of Jerusalem before the world. When this boy becomes an adult, there will be changes that make the whole world take notice and glorify God!

Everyone looks for a new king to reestablish our

independence from the Romans, and that would be wonderful! But I tell you, if people do not change the way they do things, we will just have another series of kings getting worse and worse - and be stuck still in the cycle of getting God angry, getting punished, and getting back to blessed.

I think the Messiah will be more than that. How, I do not exactly know, but I am excited that change is coming, fundamental change to the world, and that our people are at the center of it! Maybe we can get past all the oppression, fighting, violence - and get to living where people actually can

- † get justice against the powerful who misuse them,
- † treat one another with caring love instead of giving in to tempers and temptations, and
- † make a better world for our children, that everyone praises God for our abundance of blessings.

I give God thanks in **joy** for our Messiah, and will pray with **love** for His continued health and wellbeing, in the **hope** He brings for our future, a future of **peace** and prosperity for all. Keep watch for the changes to come, and may the Almighty's **light** brighten all of your days. *Shalom!*

Message: Watchnight



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/our-spirit-waits/first-sunday-after-christmas-day-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/first-sunday-after-christmas-year-b-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Eternal Lord,

as we take time now to further consider today's scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we learn to trust in and watch for Your grace transforming the world. Amen.

We conclude the "Our Spirit Waits" series today with "Watchnight":

"Beginning in 1755, John Wesley encouraged gathering for worship on New Year's Eve for a Covenant Renewal Service.

In the Black church, Watch Night was first observed on December 31, 1862, as enslaved and free African Americans gathered to worship, pray, sing, and wait for January 1, 1863, the day the Emancipation Proclamation became law.

Also called Freedom's Eve, this first Watch Night led to a yearly worship gathering to mark the turning of the old year into the new."



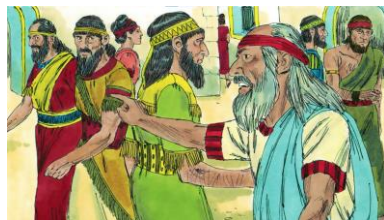
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By now we are all familiar with it: the countdown to midnight (10, 9, 8...) with the ball drop in Times Square. Some years we are happy to see go (2020 comes to mind) and others we would happily repeat. Yet time passes, and the only direction we can actually go is forward.

What are some of the things you look forward to for 2024? <Let them respond>

The Israelites in the Old Testament reading today had returned at last from exile to the Promised Land and were full of anticipation for the future. What do you think they wanted? <Let them respond>

Many of us wish for things to be the way they once were, harkening back to “the good old days.” Certainly it would be wonderful for aging bodies to have the function of youth, and it is comfortable to deal with what is familiar rather than try to change with the times - unlearning habits is difficult!



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/illustrations/ezekiel-valley/>

Isaiah tells the Israelites they will be “called by a

new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.” Do you know what it means, biblically, to be given a new name? <Let them respond>

There is a sense of creation when God names things, resulting in a new status and new relationship with our Lord. God named both John and Jesus before they were conceived, that we (humanity) could know that changes were coming – that life as God’s people would be different than the traditional Hebrew view of it.

Is growing and changing generally easy?
<Let them respond>

Easy or not, change for the better involves work. Simeon talked about Jesus and the future in glowing terms, but then warned Mary that it would also involve turmoil and pain. Raising a child involves many ups and downs, and I think raising the Savior of the world brought those to extremes.



picture from <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=802707924995173&set=pb.100057679170735.-2207520000&type=3>; credit: OVCS

But that work is worth it. We are not working to be children of God – as Paul wrote to the Galatians, we are already God’s children, heirs to the heavenly kingdom. So what are we to work for? To build God’s kingdom on earth, that all may know our Lord and increase the love that is shared as a result!

In the portrayal, Anna spoke of the challenges of her community, words that sadly apply as readily to society today as they did to the people of her day. Every generation faces challenges from which humanity can learn to be better, but many of us do not want to put in the work for it. We are like beginning music students who want to go from first notes on our instruments to world class performers without putting in the thousands of hours of practice that it takes to get there. We must work through the struggles to become the masterpieces God created us to be.

So what do we do from here, to begin the next portion of our journey to Christian perfection as we keep watch for Jesus on this earth, this New Year's Eve?

- † First, give God thanks for what was, especially if we will never have it again. We were shaped by what we had and what we experienced, to become the unique people we are today.
- † Next, look at what is, and thank God for the blessings of today. What we [are and have] are our bases for moving forward, what we have to work with; we are not without resources.
- † Then, ask God for guidance, particularly with struggles you see in the world around you. Ask our Redeemer how we can now help others, for the wisdom and resources to replace sinful darkness with the grace of the Light of the word.



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/our-spirit-waits/first-sunday-after-christmas-day-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/first-sunday-after-christmas-year-b-graphics>

As we prepare to celebrate the secular New Year today, I invite you to make a resolution to live more fully into God's kingdom, to bring the love of Jesus more fully into action on this earth, and to let the power of the Holy Spirit work through you more fully, that in doing so you may become a masterpiece for God's eternal kingdom.

June 2023.