

**“Ordinary Prophets”**  
**Luke 2: 22-40**  
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**December 31, 2023**

Rituals. I’m sure your family has them, especially at Christmas. We have several family holiday rituals. Christmas Day, we must watch Chevy Chase untangle thousands of strands of lights while Cousin Eddy empties out the RV’s waste hose into the street, and Aunt Bethany says the Pledge of Allegiance as the blessing. We must make my great-grandmother’s egg nog recipe and drink it out of glass moose mugs. We must eat a specific breakfast casserole recipe, and open one present each on Christmas Eve. Usually, they’re matching Christmas pajamas. Now that we have a toddler who has big feelings about routines, we understand this from a new perspective, especially at bedtime. Bath time is followed by footie PJs, followed by brushing our teeth from the Bluey toothbrush, and reading the book “Honey Bunny,” while drinking a bottle. And the crib needs to have between four to six pacies, his sloth, his raccoon, and his baby doll, his little truck pillow, and his blankie. All must be in place and go according to plan for bedtime to be successful. I’m sure your family has rituals too, especially surrounding big days — Christmas, birthdays, Easter, etc. Now these are obviously more familial rituals, but it brings us to today’s text from Luke.

Today we find ourselves in a week that really has no rhythm, in fact the twelve days of Christmas coincide with the lost week between the 25th and the 31st when time seems to move to its own set of rules — expanding and contracting with no discernible pattern. How many times this week have you said, what day is it? These have been slow, long, lounge-y, lazy days where none of us are sure where we’re supposed to be or what we’re supposed to be doing. But today’s text from Luke links Christmas with the purification rituals of childbirth, a period of 40 days following the birth of a male baby that brings the mother back into participatory life within the spiritual community. After eight days, Jesus had been circumcised and named in accordance with Jewish law. Here,

32 days later, his parents are taking him to the temple in order to offer a sacrifice and to consecrate their child to the Lord.

Can you imagine their mood that day? Eight days after the birth, still in a postpartum haze, these two young first-time parents are in a quiet procession up to the temple grounds. I'm sure they were solemn—undoubtedly sleep deprived—and nervous as they prepared for the sacrifice. It's a powerful scene, imagining them with eight-day-old baby Jesus in one arm, and two turtledoves in the other arm, the offering designated for the poor. We all know that tiny babies seem to have a way of yielding a certain kind of power. I've seen calloused old men become gentle as doves with a baby in their arms. Gruff, stubborn voices shift to sweet coos and falsetto baby talk when tiny children are around. Just one walk through Target with Jennings in the cart, and we're winking and waving, blowing kisses at strangers. Herod lived in fear that a child would be born to fulfill prophecy and take over his kingdom. Pharaoh so feared the Hebrews' infant sons that he had an entire generation of newborns killed to keep the people from growing in number and strength. The sheer presence of a baby is powerful.

There is much we can learn about Jesus before the little guy even learns how to talk. We've already learned much through the prophetic words of his mother and aunt as they talked through hopes and dreams and convictions about what God might be doing while they were both pregnant. And we learn something about Jesus based on who the spokespeople are. Always, always, we hear from the most unlikely sources. Throughout the scriptures it is from the paupers and the widows and the women, the outcasts, the least of society who know things about God. It's the shepherds out watching their flocks in the dead of night that become recipients of the great announcement. It's the wise men from a foreign land who somehow discover a map in the stars. In today's text it's Simeon and Anna.

Simeon was an old man who we know virtually nothing about—not his status, lineage, or his occupation. All the text tells us is that he was a faithful, devout man, and that God revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Can you even imagine that? I wonder how God revealed this message to Simeon and how he

possibly knew to trust? Somehow, he held on to that promise, until this day, when after years of waiting he arrived at the temple and knew he was staring into the face of the Messiah. We can imagine this old man with a baby in his arms. Perhaps he was giddy with joy. Perhaps he stared at this baby with tears streaming down his face. Perhaps he was so completely lost in the wonder of it all, that he was just transfixed on that tiny face, as he realized that he was holding the child for whom he'd waited — not for weeks or months, but for decades.

And then there's Anna, who is a widowed 84-year-old woman, one of the least privileged people of her society. Her lineage and occupation were a little more obvious than Simeon. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was a prophet. She was in the temple day and night. Now, you may be picturing a woman who's isolated, maybe a person who spends her last years alone in her grief. But the Jerusalem temple was not like a modern church, it was a massive complex where people gathered to teach, to pray, to be together in community. She had something to say here, and she added her own joy and praise to the moment. She watched the whole thing unfold, and when she realized she had seen the Messiah, she raced all over town excitedly sharing the news of this child, making her the very first person in the gospel accounts to become a witness to preach the Good News to others. This is no surprise since she had been a prophet for so many years at this point. Simeon and Anna spent the majority of their lives at the temple, fasting, praying, reading sacred texts, and just waiting with this sense of hopefulness.

In this whole narrative of Jesus' presentation at the temple, I am most struck by the last words Simeon speaks about this tiny baby to his mother — “this child is destined for the falling at the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed...and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Until these words, his expression was uplifting, joyful, praising, there was a sense of wonder. A promise had been fulfilled. He had laid eyes on the Messiah, and he knew that he could depart from this world knowing that God's liberating work was coming to fruition. And then come these words, framed as a blessing. I do wonder how they landed in Mary's tired, postpartum spirit, because this

blessing wasn't gentle. But those weren't the first words out of his mouth! The first words were, "now, dismiss your servant in peace." In other words, let me die. Now that God has done what God promised, the old man was complete. And after this interaction, Anna and Simeon disappear from the gospel altogether. Tom Long writes, "It's almost as if, having seen the news reports of God's coming salvation in Jesus, they get up, turn off the television, go to bed and leave the rest of the story up to the twenty- and thirty-somethings. And they depart not because they are weary, but because they are full of hope in God's providence — and therefore able to trust the future to God."

The ancient world could not have been a place for the aged to persevere. No pain relief, no climate control, no modern conveniences that would make the natural process of the body breaking down less uncomfortable. And not to play a armchair psychologist here, but that the aging process is not gentle on the mind either. There can often be confusion, social isolation, gaps in memory, the inability to sleep well. Through years of sitting with senior adults, I have heard so many say with tears in their eyes that their best years are behind them, and someone younger needs to step up to the plate and serve. I do get that, but here's the thing: every time I sit with a senior adult and listen to their story, I walk away astonished by their open heartedness, their wisdom and faithfulness. I learn from paths that they have already walked. In our congregation, our retirees are the very soul of this church. They are the ones who knit prayer shawls, who prepare dinners for families who are grieving, who answer the phones when you call the church office, who serve in our clothing ministry and teach Sunday school and send emails about prayer requests. They hang clothes and clean shoes that you donate to the clothing ministry. They shop for toys year-round for our annual Toy Joy giveaway. They make red velvet bows and hang garland for Advent. And of course, there are so many lay people and volunteers of all ages within our congregation — we are grateful for every single person that helps us be the presence of Christ in this community — but I know I can speak for the entire ministerial staff here by saying that we would not be the vibrant, generous church that we are without our senior adults.

In the 2021 film “Don’t look up,” Jennifer Lawrence and Leonardo DiCaprio play scientists who discover a planet-killing comet headed straight towards Earth. Now, I don’t believe in spoilers, so I won’t tell you anything that’s not in the trailer. They immediately go to the president, played by the remarkable Meryl Streep, and she is an all-out narcissist concerned only with herself and spinning her latest scandal. But what’s more disturbing than the president’s narcissism is the portrayal of culture. Every person is self-absorbed, social media-obsessed, shallow, and totally distracted from life. No one seems to care that a comet the size of Mount Everest is orbiting in the solar system and within six months of making impact with the earth. Every person is too wrapped up in their own story to simply look up. And I have to admit that while I was watching, I got a sinking feeling that maybe this was about me, too. I have to confess that much of my life is spent glued to my email, consumed by my to-do list, distracted by Instagram for way too many hours a day. It is both a gift and a curse to get a daily screen report on how many hours you’ve spent on your phone at the end of the week. When I’m not looking up, how can I possibly attend to the sacred world around me?

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes that “To pronounce a blessing on something is to see it from the divine perspective. To pronounce a blessing is to participate in God’s own initiative. To pronounce a blessing is to share God’s own audacity.” That’s what Simeon and Anna did in the temple that day. They saw Jesus from God’s perspective and they believed in the audacity of what God was doing in the world through this baby. What would happen if we slowed down enough to choose where we look? Perhaps then we would notice. We would have the ability to see and bless — ourselves, our loved ones, our neighbors on the street, even those we would perceive as our enemies.

I’m not sure Simeon and Anna had some special gift that allowed them a unique power to see things others could not. Instead, I wonder if the most pivotal part of their life in the temple was where they looked. They didn’t just suddenly notice the sacredness of this one particular baby. They had cultivated the gift of knowing where and how to look

for God in the ordinary. They cultivated the practice of trying to see the world through God's eyes by taking notice of the sacred right in front of their faces. They were people who had chosen to live their lives at a slower pace. They were people who said "no" to the loud voices screaming "pay attention to this! Pay attention to that!" The shepherds, the magi, Simeon and Anna...none of them ever knew what miracles that baby would perform, what people he would welcome, or what love he would ultimately give. But they knew enough about God to trust, leaning into the future with hope.

I wonder if Simeon and Anna claimed the word prophet for themselves, or if they grimaced at the thought of that weighty title — *prophet*. Something tells me none of us would call ourselves prophets either, and yet, I'm looking at a congregation full of them. They chose to look up, and we can too. Amen.