



SAINT LUKE'S

“A TIME FOR EVERY PURPOSE UNDER HEAVEN”

FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION
YEAR A

MALACHI 3:1-4

PSALM 84

HEBREWS 2:14-18

LUKE 2:22-40

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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We live in challenging times. The gospel gives us a different perspective from which we can see the rest of our lives and a context for our struggles. By the time Luke's gospel is written, the Temple in Jerusalem in which Jesus is today presented has been destroyed by the Romans. Levelled - as punishment for Jewish rebellion. Vindictiveness, revenge, corruption in high places, powerful people oppressing the less powerful - none of these things are new. Luke tells us also that when Jesus is dedicated in the Temple, most people do not know or notice, including the religious leaders. But there are always God's faithful few. Two people have been waiting for decades. Anna and Simeon show us that waiting - not aimlessly, but actively and purposefully, not giving up - is part of the journey of faith. Jesus' arrival is the joy of their long lives.

How often must Anna and Simeon have asked themselves during their waiting- will it be Now? They must have heard rumors of the Messiah's birth. Is the time fulfilled? Is this God's Now? There was nothing they could do to hasten this day or to push God's timetable forward. How hard it is to wait for our hopes to be fulfilled. And how hard it is to see our hopes slip away. How hard it is to work for what we believe in our whole lives and see that progress has slowed, stopped or reversed. Anna and Simeon have a resource in their waiting - they know their own faith story. So they know that God thinks and acts in generations. They know that God is not absent but working until the time is fulfilled. It gives them hope, patience and courage to keep going.

Teilhard De Chardin said: *By means of all created things without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us and molds us.* One of the ways God molds us is by waiting. We do not usually like to wait. It chafes our spirit. But

there are hidden gifts in not getting what want when we want it. (Which is usually right now. Or yesterday!) Learning *how* to wait is one way Christians are called to live differently.

Many of us find action and activism come more easily than waiting. And without doubt, God expects us to act according to our faith and our conscience, and to strive for justice for all people. (We also need to do this without judging others who are *less* activist. It is not a competition and people have different callings). Yet we also read that God's way with humanity in history is both/and. Sometimes it seems as though we take two steps forward and one step backwards. We discover that the life of faith consists of both what we can do *and* trusting God as well. We do everything we can and then as people of faith there is one more thing we must do - trust God. God is not absent while we are waiting. Just because God's work is not immediately visible to us, doesn't mean God is inactive. The Holy Spirit is always working.

Our waiting in fact images God. When we act, then watch and wait, we mirror God's waiting on us. God waits for our response to Him, to love God back. Living in this continuum of action and waiting is part of the image of God in us.

There are gifts in waiting. One is learning self-control. We are in a culture of leadership that acts as if truth-full words don't matter. As Christians, we know that words matter and truthful speech matters. We know that self-restraint is one of the ways we respect others. *How* we choose to communicate matters now more than ever. There is enough mean-spirited pettiness and name calling in the public square. Let us choose to be thoughtful in what we say *and* how we say it. Let us choose

non-violence as way of life – not only in action but also in speech. We live in the age of immediacy – *Instagram*; *Snapchat*. *Twitter...Tweet!* ... suggesting the chattering of birds all at the same time. Let us choose to slow it down. God does. Anna and Simeon pace themselves to wait and wait until God's time is fulfilled. We need to pace ourselves or the intensity of current events will burn us out. Many tell me that they need a break from news and this is why. It's too much and too intense. We don't always have to react in 5 seconds. God doesn't. God even takes a Sabbath day. In these reactive times, let us be a less reactive presence.

Another gift of waiting is clarity. Focus. We refine our understanding of what we are waiting for and how to see. Constructive response becomes possible as we see thoughtfully and less reactively. We can choose to meet and listen to those who are saying things that we find mystifying or offensive, and try to understand why they think as they do. We can locate the issue without demonizing the messenger. We may be able to find common ground on what some of the issues are, even if not on solutions. I tried to do that this week. To get underneath my own visceral reactions and ask myself: Is there a part of their deepest concern that I can agree with? Is there any common ground? It's not easy to do, but Scripture is honest about this: following Jesus challenges and changes us in many ways.

How will we live our faith in these days of tumult? We will have many opportunities to live our faith in the months ahead. Can we be healers who can listen as well as act, and watch for God's Spirit at work around us? Can we companion *everyone* who needs our support, including

those with whom we may disagree? Sometimes, people who don't seem to be in obvious need - people of privilege, white, educated Americans - have hidden needs. Everyone needs the strength and compassion of the Holy Spirit. We may feel we are at the mercy of current events. But God's mercy and strength are always stronger in the long run than human power. Human power can only subvert the goodness and love of God for so long. The love of God will keep coming into our world, bidden or unbidden, looked for or not. The love of God is gentle but relentless. Jesus comes to this Temple today and to the temple of our hearts. May always be eager to receive him.

AMEN

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