

Sermon: What comes next?

Christmas is almost always preceded by a sense of anticipation.

Sometimes that sense of anticipation is one of excitement and enthusiasm, and sometimes that sense of anticipation is one of dread. The former case is almost the exclusive domain of those who are young, or at the very least, young at heart. The later case is often felt by those who feel overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of the season, or who despair of the crass commercialism which begins before Halloween is over.

That sense of dread quite often finds a place in the hearts of those who have lost loved ones and face the holiday without them. But one way or the other the twenty-fifth of December is one of those dates which we look forward to with a sense of anticipation, good or bad.

But what happens when the sun comes up on December twenty-sixth? What do we have to look forward to then? A trip to the mall for after-Christmas sales, or to return some gift that wasn't quite right?

I suppose we could always look forward to lots of turkey leftovers and to taking down all the decorations and putting our homes back in order. We may even be able to anticipate a few days or weeks of peace and quiet now that our guests have gone home, and life is returning to normal.

But I'm wondering this morning what it is that the Lord would like us to be waiting for and looking forward to now that we have celebrated his birth as our Savior and our Lord.

If the message of Christmas has touched our hearts, if Christ has been born in us, what are we waiting for now?

In the second chapter of Luke's Gospel, he tells us something about some of the individuals who find themselves confronted with the fact that Christmas has come, the Savior has arrived, and they now must begin dealing with what is waiting for them in the days which lie ahead.

What is there in the experiences of these individuals which can bring both hope and guidance to us as we leave the Christmas Season behind and move into the future.

The first-person Luke points out to us is a man by the name of Simeon. He comes highly recommended, for Luke describes him as being both righteous and devout.

He is, in fact, someone upon whom the Spirit of God rests as an on-going presence. He has been waiting and waiting for what Luke describes as ‘the consolation of Israel.’ That means he has spent a long period of time looking forward to the day when God’s Anointed One, the Lord’s Christ, would come to bring comfort and hope to the people of God in their oppressed and downtrodden estate.

When Mary and Joseph arrive at the Temple to carry out the rituals prescribed in God’s Law, bringing their two-month-old Son with them, Simeon knows his wait is over, but what will he wait for now?

The answer comes in the song-prayer he offers to God: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.”

For Simeon his work is done. He has spent his life waiting for God’s Promised One to come. He has done that by living righteously and devoutly, expectantly and faithfully, ever open and attentive to the leading of the Holy Spirit. He has completed his task by taking the Christ Child in his arms, proclaiming the infant’s mission to the world, and blessing the parents for the task ahead of them. All he looks forward to now is the end of his life and the peace which awaits him.

And in our old age, when we’ve finished the work Christ has given us to do, we can look forward to that as well. But before we decide that it is all right for us to consider ourselves honorably retired from the work of the Kingdom of God, we need to look at another elderly individual who is in the Temple when Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus arrive.

Her name is Anna, and she is at least eighty-four years old. Most of her life has been spent as a widow, a fragile existence at best, possibly living off the charity of those who come to the Temple for worship. For Anna, according to Luke, spent all her nights and days in God’s House, fasting and praying. He describes her as a prophet, which was a lofty designation for anyone, but especially for a woman. Israel had not had a prophet for centuries, but Anna has brought God’s Word. Now she sees that Word

made flesh. Her response to seeing the Christ Child is first of all, one of thanksgiving.

She, like Simeon, expresses her gratitude to God for the privilege of seeing the Lord's promise of redemption beginning to be fulfilled in the birth of this little boy. Her second response is to speak about Jesus to all who are willing to hear the Good News she has to share.

What she is looking forward to now are the days to come as she continues her life in the Temple and the opportunities it brings to tell others that God's promises are about to be fulfilled.

And however old you and I may be, when Christmas has come and gone, we need to look forward to the opportunities we have to talk with others about the Child who was born, the son who was given for us and for all the world.

One of the most intriguing characters in the Christmas narrative is Joseph, stepfather to the Son of God. We learn most about Joseph in Matthew's account of our Lord's conception and birth. In the opening pages of his Gospel he tells us that Joseph was a righteous man, someone whose heart is right with his God and who seeks to please the Lord in all he does.

More than that, Matthew lets us know that Joseph is also a sensitive and compassionate person, someone who loves his fiancée and does not want her to be publicly humiliated.

Matthew tells us that Joseph was also someone to whom the Holy Spirit spoke in dreams, and when Joseph receives a message from God, he hastens to do exactly what he was told to do.

It is hard to imagine what Joseph was waiting for after Mary gave birth to her first-born. Perhaps he was waiting to hear what God would say to him next. For at some point after their trip to Jerusalem Joseph has another dream telling him to take Mary and the baby to Egypt beyond the reach of King Herod who is intent on killing this threat to his throne.

When he got that word, he immediately obeyed. But when they returned to Nazareth, I can only imagine what Joseph looked forward to as he sought

to be a worthy role model to the only Child who could truly call God His Father.

And standing on this side of Christmas we, too, would do well to look forward to the Holy Spirit's help and guidance as we seek to point others to our heavenly Father.

And then there is Mary, the mother of our Lord. After the birth of Jesus, the Jewish Law required two things: an offering which redeemed the firstborn son, and that she brings a sacrifice to establish her purification and restoration as one whose worship was acceptable to God.

For those who could afford it, that sacrifice was a lamb and a pigeon or dove. The poor could substitute a second bird in place of the lamb, which is what Mary and Joseph in their poverty were forced to do.

But as she brought her Son to the Temple to dedicate him to the Lord, she must have been thinking of all the angel Gabriel had said when he had told her of her place in God's plan, and all shepherds had shared with her regarding her little one.

There in the Temple she receives one more piece of information about the mission of her baby boy. Simeon tells her that "Jesus will cause the falling and rising of many, and He will be a sign who will be spoken against."

But Simeon goes on with a word for Mary as well. He says, "A sword will pierce your own soul too."

As the Holy Family returns to Nazareth, the mother of our Lord has much to look forward to as she watches her first-born grow to maturity and carry out his mission as the One who will save His people from their sins.

But she must also look forward to whatever pain and suffering his mission will entail, and to that pain and sorrow which her love for him will bring. For all who love the Lord must look forward to suffering with him and for him.

But at the center of the drama is the Son of God Himself. On Christmas morning the Lord Jesus entered the world and the world's Redeemer first revealed his sacred face. In fact, the incarnation had begun nine months

earlier in Nazareth, where the Latin inscription on the altar in the Church of the Annunciation reads, "Here the Word became flesh."

But be that as it may, what does this newborn Child have to look forward to, having taken on our humanity and having become one with us? It will be thirty years before the Savior begins his public ministry, and three years after that before he accomplishes what he has come to do: to redeem a fallen humanity, to provide us with a new nature, to impart to us the reality of eternal life as the children of God.

But before that time arrives, what will the child, the adolescent, the young man, the mature adult, be looking for and waiting for in the here and now? We know little about those years, save that Luke tells us that Jesus grew and became strong and was filled with wisdom, that the grace of God was upon him and that he grew in favor with God and those around him.

We also know, from the story of his visit to the Temple that at the age of twelve he is already aware of the fact that he is the one true Son of his heavenly Father. He has come to redeem not only Jerusalem, but all humanity. His task is to embrace every aspect of our human existence, all the kinds of experiences, emotions, relationships we are heir to, that in him they, and we, might be healed and made new.

From all of that, what conclusions shall we draw? What is it that our Lord wants us to be looking forward to, waiting for as the days following Christmas continue to unfold?

More clearly than Simeon ever did, we see the salvation promised in the pages of the Old Testament ultimately fulfilled in the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God. Like Simeon, we can look forward to departing this life in peace, knowing that our Savior has gone to prepare a place for us so that we can spend eternity with him.

More than that, we can look forward to each new day with a peace which surpasses knowledge -- a peace resting on the promise that God is at work for our good in everything we may have to face, and that nothing can ever separate us from his love.

With Anna, who waited long years praying and fasting in preparation for the coming of God's Son so that she would be ready to share the Good News

with all who were open to receive it, we ought to be looking forward to the opportunities which await us for sharing that same Good News.

Everyday the Holy Spirit brings into our lives people who need to come to faith in Christ. Some of them are like the people to whom Anna spoke, down deep in their hearts they are looking for redemption, whether they call it that or not.

The Lord Jesus has given us the privilege of being witnesses to his power to save, and something we need to be looking forward to is the opportunities he will give us to share the Good News with others.

Mary and Joseph undoubtedly had unique experiences to look forward to as they faced the challenges which came with being the earthly parents of the Son of God. They would struggle to understand what it meant for their little boy to grow up to be the Savior of the world.

And we may well have to look forward to days when we will struggle to understand just what the Lord is up to, and we may need to anticipate that his pain at the sin in this world is intended to be ours as well. But the bottom line in all our thinking about what it is that we are waiting for is the hope which we have because the Son of God has come, and has promised to come again.

His coming on that first Christmas morning, taking on himself every aspect of our fallen humanity means that we have the hope that everything about us can be healed and made right.

In identifying with us he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. By his stripes we can be healed. And his promise to come again assures us that a day is on its way when we, and all creation, will be all he has ever intended for us and it to be.

That is our hope and confidence. Amen