

SERMON “GOD IN ORDINARY LIVING”

(Luke 2: 22-40 Preached at MPC on New Year’s Eve. December 31st, 2017)

Happy New Year everyone almost! In just over 14 hours from now, 2018 will be the official new year! We are lucky in Hawaii that we don’t suffer in the cold of a long winter snow and frigid weather for a whole season. When Margie and I lived in Charlotte, NC, the fall and winter seasons were fairly mild—we usually had maybe one good snow storm during that time—it would only last a few days to a week. And once the leaves dropped from the trees, the flowers loss their petals and there was no need to mow the grass, everything seemed to slow down and come to a halt—the world outside seemed to be suspended in time.

And even though nothing much seemed to be happening in mother nature, the farmers at Mallard Creek, our church community home, were still milking their cows, their wives collecting eggs to sell, farmers preparing the land for the spring planting, and children were going to school. The business of life went on as usual as merchants greeted their customers in their stores as everyone seemed to migrate indoors.

But mostly the people were waiting—waiting for the days to lengthen—waiting for the trees to bud, the flowers to get their petals—and the crops to poke through the moist surface—this was followed by the immediate takeover of a vast overlay and ground cover stretching for miles with the first layer of fresh spring wheat. I too waited for our neighbor and Mallard Creek members Ken and Shug Christenbury’s first crop of spring tomatoes, corn, and figs—watermelon to follow in the summer. Children especially were waiting—waiting for that magic day when schools would close and they would begin to experience summer's pleasures.

But summer was so far away that we couldn't even allow ourselves to think about it. To begin thinking about summer vacation at the end of December was to risk going slowly, painfully, and stark-ravingly mad. So, we waited! And we hoped! Dimly, in our heart of hearts, we hoped for the lazy, hazy days of summer!

Our Gospel lesson today has a story of waiting and great expectancy like that. Simeon was an old man. He was righteous and devout and the Holy Spirit had told him that he would not die until he saw the Messiah. You wouldn't think that Simeon would be eager to see the Messiah. After all, he had been promised that he wouldn't die until he saw the

Messiah. If he could avoid seeing the Messiah, perhaps he might live forever. But that's not how Simeon felt. He had lived a long time. He knew that there's a time to live and a time to die. He was ready to go, but he wanted to leave his people in good hands. Before he left, he wanted to know that the Messiah was poised and ready to take over—to assure the salvation of his people. Our scripture also mentions Anna—an eighty-four-year-old widow who never left the temple, but prayed there day and night.

Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord as was the custom by law. Jesus was still a tiny baby, only a few days old. Joseph and Mary couldn't take Jesus very far into the temple, because women weren't allowed beyond the Court of Women. That area would have been crowded with people, including many young couples with babies. It was a busy place—the center of worship for a whole nation. With all those people, it would have been confusing and noisy. If you were looking for the Messiah in such a place, how would you find him?

Luke tells us that the Holy Spirit guided Simeon to the temple that day. Simeon had waited so long to see the Messiah. He must have wondered, in spite of the Spirit's promise, if he would live long enough to see the Messiah. Now, finally, the Spirit guided him to the temple at just the right time. I can imagine Simeon wondering if this was the day of destiny. He had waited so long and now the Spirit was leading him through the crowd. Could it be?

Simeon must have tried to imagine what this Messiah would look like? Would he be handsome, tall and strong in physique? A commanding presence, surely! What would the Messiah be doing? Teaching? Praying? Recruiting disciples? The Spirit promised only that Simeon would SEE the Messiah—not that he would actually meet him in person. He must have wondered if he would get to speak to the Messiah and to receive the Messiah's blessing.

And then the Spirit stopped Simeon in front of a very ordinary-looking couple with a very ordinary-looking baby. It must have taken a moment for Simeon to get his bearings, because no one had explained that the Messiah would be a brand-new baby boy. But then God is always full of surprises—finding unlikely candidates to save the people. Who would you have chosen to go up against Goliath, the giant? Surely not some shepherd kid with a slingshot—but that's who God chose and Simeon knew that story.

Then, after a moment's hesitance, Simeon must have realized that God had done it again! The Messiah had come, but not as expected. No one could know that this baby was the Messiah unless guided by the Spirit. But, once Simeon caught his breath, he took the baby in his arms, and praised God, saying: "Now you are releasing your servant, Master, according to your word, in peace; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared before the face of all peoples; a light for revelation to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel" (vv. 29-32).

As surprised as Simeon must have been at seeing the baby Messiah, he has a surprise for us as well. There in the temple, in the center of all things Jewish, Simeon praised God for preparing "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (v. 32). Is that what the Messiah was to be—a light for revelation to the Gentiles? People were expecting a Messiah who would help the Jews in the struggle against Gentiles! What was this business about "a light for revelation to the Gentiles"? Is this Jewish Messiah going to be everyone's Messiah? And then Anna got into the act—old and faithful Anna—always-praying Anna—always-in-the-temple Anna. She too began to praise God for this baby.

Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary were amazed at what Simeon and Anna had to say about Jesus. That surely was true, but this wasn't the first amazing thing that had happened to Mary and Joseph. Mary had been amazed when the angel appeared to her. Joseph had been amazed when the angel appeared to him. They had both been amazed when the shepherds had shown up at the stable. Now they were amazed that an old man and an old woman had picked their baby out of a crowd and had said such wonderful things about him.

But then, Luke tells us, after they had done what they came to do, Mary and Joseph returned to Galilee to their hometown. Luke doesn't tell us much about what happened there, except that Jesus grew and became strong—he was filled with wisdom and the favor of God. It sounds like, after all the flurry of attention at Jesus' birth, they went back to ordinary lives in an ordinary place and time.

It would be years before they experienced anything extraordinary again. They must have wondered if they had been dreaming. Had they really seen angels? Had Simeon and Anna actually picked Jesus out of the crowd? In the uneventful years to follow, they must have wondered if they had just imagined these things. It would be years before

they saw the answer, and the answer would not look anything like what they had expected. But we know the rest of the story. We know that God was at work while Mary and Joseph waited.

Today, we need to hear the mystery behind this story of Joseph and Mary and Jesus and Simeon and Anna. It's hardly the usual story. It's quite unlike the television stories that present us daily with some sort of conflict that is easily resolved in thirty minutes—with all the loose ends tied so neatly. This is a story of a man and woman, Simeon and Anna, who grew old looking for the salvation of the Lord, and who found that salvation only at the end of their lives.

When Simeon prays, "Now you are releasing your servant, Master, according to your word, in peace" (v. 29). he is really saying, "Now I can die in peace." He had seen the Messiah. He had not actually seen the Messiah save anyone, but he had seen the baby and had heard the Holy Spirit's promise that this was the one. Now he could die in peace.

And then Mary and Joseph, whose lives were so quickly and thoroughly turned upside down by this unexpected baby, returned to Nazareth where, apparently, their lives went back to a normal pace. Both these stories—the story of Simeon and Anna and the story of Mary and Joseph—are waiting stories—waiting patiently, faithfully, and full of expectancy. Both are surprise stories. In another sense, both are disappointing stories:

Neither Simeon nor Anna would live long enough to see Jesus begin his ministry as a young man. We hear so little about Joseph that we suspect that he died before Jesus began his ministry. While Mary was blessed to be the mother of the Lord, you could hardly say that she would live an easy life.

These are not stories where the good guys win in the end—unless we really, really, really see them through the eyes of faith. We need to hear these stories, though, because they're our stories too. We, too, spend lots of time waiting for the Lord. It's been over two thousand years and Jesus hasn't come yet. We too pray for all sorts of things and then wait for answers. "Oh, Lord, please heal and restore so and so...please send and provide a solution to our problems!" Sometimes God answers our prayers immediately, but many times we find ourselves returning to Nazareth—going back to the place where we've always been—to the routine and ordinary rhythm of life—wondering if our prayers have somehow bounced off the ceiling before ever reaching God.

A part of the problem is that we have come to expect so much so quickly. A faith based marriage and family psychologist in Charlotte, NC, Kimberly Hall, talks about people walking through her door and wanting instant answers for all their problems. She said: "No one wants to wait for anything and for the most part, no one has to anymore." She talked about Christians, who are different only in that Christians "expect God to make it so." She said: "The problem is that in this country, you can have what you want when you want it most of the time—People like the fact that they can buy a 50-foot tree and instantly plant it in their yard and not have to wait the years it took for that tree to get to 50 feet.

She concluded by saying: "Why would anyone want to wait on relationships, or wait on God." Why indeed? I can't imagine why we would want to wait for anything, but I know that, very often, we must. Occasionally, we get exactly what we want when we want it, but more often we don't. Occasionally, a young person strikes it rich and gets a lifetime supply of money at age twenty. When that happens, he or she soon finds that the things that really count don't come so easily—a husband or wife, children, friends—a purpose in life or something to get out of bed for in the morning.

But few of us strike it rich when we're twenty. For most of us, life involves lots of waiting—lots of patience. We work hard to get through school or schools, which seems to take forever. Then there are the student loans to pay off! Then we get our first real job and begin the long, slow process of establishing ourselves. Somewhere along the way, we get married and have children. If everything goes well, we make a little progress each year. But none of it is easy, and little of it is quick.

But just as God was at work in Nazareth, God is also at work right here in Mililani. Nothing special seemed to be happening in Nazareth—just a little boy growing up--something that happens everywhere all the time. But God was at work in Nazareth, and God is at work here too!

After reading this Gospel story, I was struck by the fact that both Simeon and Anna were delighted just to get a glimpse of the Messiah before they died. They didn't get to see the Messiah at work. They didn't get to see him save the people. They had only God's promise that everything would work out all right—and they were such people of faith that they were happy and satisfied with just that. We would do well to be like Simeon

and Anna. Jesus is God's promise that everything will work out all right, and we would have far fewer worries if we would believe that promise.

Some years ago, Gilbert Bowen, an Illinois pastor, visited East Germany. He had the opportunity to speak at some of the churches there, and recalls people asking if he thought the Berlin Wall would ever come down. He always answered, "Not in our lifetime." He tells of bemoaning the tyranny of Honnecker's communist regime—and having an East German pastor respond with a gentle rebuke—"Honnecker does not determine our future, Herr Bowen said."

Later, after the Berlin Wall fell, Pastor Bowen reflected on that experience. He says: "I am sure I was impressed by (that pastor's) piety, but I am not sure I thought he was very realistic, given the hard facts of geopolitics. But I ask you, who looks silly now? All those wise men, pundits, historians, not one of whom foresaw the collapse of communism, or my Christian friends who refused to give up hope, even though there seemed no rational basis for hoping."

One of the best modern-day dialogues about hope comes from one of my favorite movies "The Shawshank Redemption" released in 1994 starring Morgan Freeman and Tim Robbins. In a scene near the end of the movie, the character Ellis Boyd Redding or "Red" reads a letter from his escaped friend Andy Duffresne who took 20 years to bore a hole through his cell wall using only a small rock hammer—story in the movie is Andy was able to crawl through 5 football lengths in the sewer line out to the local river—Ellis is sitting beside a huge oak tree in an out of the way cornfield reading a letter Andy told him would be there if he got out. Ellis just got paroled after serving over 30 years! The letter reads, "Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things—and no good thing ever dies."

Friends as we approach the dawn of a new year, please remember the gifts of Advent we just celebrated—the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love given to us through the ordinary birth of an extraordinary Christ Child—so no matter how ordinary the day—no matter how difficult the experience—always remember that God loves you—God is at work behind the scenes—God is working to redeem your life. Hebrews 11: 1 says in KJV, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen! Never give up hope in the God who comes to us in our ordinary living! Always believe! And then wait to see what wondrous things God will do. Amen!

