

“All we have to do is Look”

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I think one of the easiest things in the world to spot might be new parents. I bet the people of Jerusalem that saw Mary and Joseph headed toward the temple could read them from a mile away. Imagine young Mary, walking into the temple after traveling with her new baby. She is tired, probably a little dirty, still healing. She is here because this is what we do, this is who we are. Maybe she doesn’t really want to be here, surrounded by all these people, holding her most precious secret in shaking arms. But she is a faithful servant, and she is here to give thanks for the gift of her son, and to offer a sacrifice to God. Joseph is thankful too, if still a little confused. Fatherhood is going to be very different from what he expected, but he’s doing his best.

These poor, tired, young parents probably hope this will be a simple day. Bring Jesus to the Temple, offer sacrifice, be purified, go home. Deep down, Mary knows better. God’s path for her has been anything but simple so far.

Our friend Simeon, whose words have been said and sung more times than we can count, is a stranger to this young couple. He is a devout man, a man who has spent his life dedicated to the law and to following the guidance of the Holy Spirit. By living a life of prayer and praise, Simeon has been given a gift, a promise from God. God has promised him that the redemption of the world is coming, and in his lifetime at that. On a day like any other day, he is led by an impulse to the temple, and there he sees a new mother with her infant. He sees the light of the world. Overcome with joy that cannot be contained, he sings praises to God for this gift.

Overhearing, our sister Anna, a prophet who has given her life over to God, whose days are marked by prayer and fasting, moves toward this joyful scene. With eyes and ears that are attuned to God’s voice, she hears the truth of Simeon’s words. The world has changed forever, because this child is in it. Just like Simeon, she cannot keep her joy to herself. This child IS her joy. She must tell everyone who will listen. She must tell those who have been waiting to hear.

In the midst of all this ruckus, our new parents. A stranger is holding their son and singing about falling and rising and salvation and revelation. Another stranger is running around

telling everyone their son is the redemption of Israel. I think it's safe to say this isn't exactly what they were expecting. Mary lets out a sigh, chuckles to herself. What exactly DID she expect? Mary may wear the tell-tale signs of a new parent, but she has also seen angels. The words "he will be great and will be called son of the most high" echo in her head. Simeon's words are added to the place in her heart where she ponders, where hope and fear live together.

Anna and Simeon saw something special that day, something many others walked by without a second glance. They saw because they were looking, listening, waiting. It is easy to miss something you aren't looking for.

Before I came here, while I was still in seminary, one of my greatest responsibilities was to run the children's program for the seminary community. Kids of the Seminary, "Chaos" for short, is the closest thing we had in Sewanee to a regular weekly Sunday School for the families with small children in our midst. Every Thursday night, a liturgy designed by students took place in our seminary chapel, normally an extremely quiet contemplative space. But on Thursday evenings, the only time during the week that students, their spouses, and their children could all be present in the pews together at once, the place was buzzing with a different kind of energy. Babies cried and were nursed, small children ran into the aisle to hug their favorite schoolmates, and homesick college students sometimes quietly joined a row of families to be embraced by surrogate mothers and adopted older brothers. It was a sacred space, and the beauty of that space extended across the sidewalk to a community meal, followed by my favorite hour of the week, Chaos time. Although the size and age spread of the group changed from year to year, I looked forward to my time in the classroom with my classmates' children more than anything else during my three years as director of their Christian education.

Along with some classmates and friends that I had conscripted into taking advantage of this "learning experience", I would gather the seminary children into a normal college seminar room lined with whiteboards and swivel chairs, and we would together tell the stories of our faith, ask difficult and often silly questions, and create things for the children to take home as icons of their time together.

Every week as the kids of the Chaos community gathered to act out bible stories, make crafts, and be together, something incredible happened. Amidst the holy chaos of shouting,

asking questions, elmers glue and sequins, our young friends start looking. They looked for their favorite part of the story, the character they liked best. They looked for someone to help them write their name, so mom and dad would know which pile of popsicle sticks to pick up. They looked for their friends and their favorite teachers. They looked for God.

At the end of the night, after crafts were collected and supplies are put away, every child and every adult gathered in a circle. We all held hands. Someone started our prayer, and we passed it around by squeezing hands. Sometimes the prayers were a little silly, although I do think indoor plumbing is something to be thankful for. But mostly the prayers were about what they'd seen. One of our little friends asked God to help her mom get some rest because she had been working very hard. Another gave thanks to God for the love he saw between two brothers in the classroom. And another told God she was glad he had given us the Bible, because she loves to learn about him.

The prayers of these growing Christians remind us of how easy it is to see God, if we only look. When Mary brought her little baby into the temple, with a modest offering and tired eyes, most people didn't even see them at first. But Simeon was looking, and he saw. He was looking for a promise, and he saw fulfillment. He was looking for salvation, and he saw a savior. Anna was listening for the voice of God, and she heard joy. She was looking for the glory of God and she saw it in the life of the son. They were looking for God, and they saw Christ.

The light to enlighten the nations, the light of Christ, the light we have been celebrating since Christmas Eve, is what illuminates our world. With eyes open like Simeon, with ears attuned like Anna, where might we find the Christ child? With the faith of Mary, what good news might we bear? We are a people freed from darkness, walking in the light of life. Our world is bright with the glory of God. All we have to do is look.