

“To See”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
The Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple – 2 & 3 February 2019
Psalm 84; Luke 2:22-40

Few people took much notice. It was a common enough sight, parents with a baby boy at the Temple, come to offer their firstborn son to God, and to give a simple sacrifice – a few birds – to keep him as their own. So why would anyone pay them special attention? It happened every day. As Mary and Joseph prepared for this ritual, everyone else focused on other things, except for Simeon and Anna.

Simeon had been summoned there by the Holy Spirit. God had promised him that he’d see the Messiah before he died. Anna, on the other hand, had taken up residence in the Temple after her husband’s death, praying night and day. We don’t know why. Unlike Simeon, it doesn’t seem that her presence in the Temple involved seeking out the Messiah.

Maybe as an elderly widow she had no place else to go. Maybe there was no place she’d rather be, nothing she’d rather do than to pray in that sacred space. As the Psalmist sang, “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise. For a day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room.” Whatever their motive and purpose, both of them were vigilant: Simeon alert for the fulfillment of God’s promise; Anna’s senses and intuition sharpened by countless hours of prayer. Nobody else noticed, but they did.

Imagine Mary and Joseph’s surprise when Simeon approached them and took Jesus into his arms and gave thanks to God for the fulfillment of the promise. At long last, he actually held the person he’d been waiting for, “[God’s] salvation . . . a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” Then he told Mary that her son would create disruption, the rising and falling of many, a man

who would be opposed – just what every parent hopes for their child. Mary’s heart would be pierced, too.

What a disturbing prediction. “The child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him,” and I suspect that’s an understatement. To punctuate what he said, Simeon told God he was now ready to die. Nothing else that followed could possibly match this joyous experience, and Simeon was also ready to go because he had discharged his duty – a word not much in favor nowadays. To get a promise like that from God, however freely given, demands a response – a response Simeon offered through his prophecy. Once he’d gone home, Anna arrived, praising God for this child “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

That’s a lot to take in and probably not how Mary and Joseph expected their day to go. What could the words of these strangers mean? Imagine their confusion and concern. Yes, angels had told them who Jesus was and what he would do. Maybe they wondered if angels had visited Simeon and Anna, too, or maybe they’d heard the story from the shepherds who spread the message far and wide after their visit to the manger. Whatever the case, those two prophets disappeared from the story just as quickly as they appeared, never to return, and Mary and Joseph performed their duty under the law and went home.

Only Luke shares this episode with us. It’s found nowhere else in scripture, and I think he includes it to serve both as a warning and as encouragement for us. We can be, and often are, like the majority of the people in the Temple who, going about their own business, didn’t notice the presence of the Messiah in their midst. But we can also be like Simeon and Anna instead.

It’s easy to not see, to not notice Jesus, because he often appears in ordinary, everyday situations: small and unobtrusive, blending in, just another baby like all the others that flowed

through the Temple day after day. The crowd missed a great blessing, the opportunity to witness the one person in all of history who mattered most. They missed it, because they were unprepared and distracted, and we can empathize with them.

Even when we're looking hard for Jesus, he can be tough to spot. We live in a world so flooded with fake light that we can get blinded by all the sensational things that are happening. The light of Christ shines so much brighter, but there's only so much our eyes can handle before they're overloaded – eyes both physical and spiritual. So sometimes, we've got to look away from the glitter and the sparkle and even from the fires that rage. We need to close our eyes and ignore the shiny stuff and save our sight so that we can focus on Jesus, and when we do, it makes a big difference, but even then, catching a glimpse of him can be elusive.

We may have an idea in our heads about where he is, or how he looks, or what he's up to, and so we look there, and nothing. That's disappointing and frustrating, not the way we expected it to go, and if we're not careful, we might give up, never realizing that Jesus may not show up where we thought, because we've overlooked our own faulty assumptions about who he is or how he looks or what he's up to.

Fortunately, there are plenty of clues in scripture about the where, what, how, and who of Jesus. So dig in, and prepare to be surprised. The more you study, the more you learn, and the more you learn, the more you realize there's a lot more to learn. Studying scripture is a lifelong process of discovering Jesus. It's good to do alone, but better to do with others, who see things we miss and help temper our misperceptions – a gift we can offer others as well. The Bible's indispensable to seeing Jesus, but it's not enough. That might sound heresy, but read all you want, without prayer, good luck.

Prayer sharpens our vision, especially when we stay still in silence. Now that's easier for some and harder for others, and if you're one of the latter, I feel you. There's so much to do that it feels like the walls are closing in and the world will stop spinning if we don't keep plowing forward full speed. It feels like a waste, even a sin to just sit, but it gives God a good chance to really go to work on us, when we let go of the distractions and look away from the shiny stuff that doesn't really matter. Laser surgery can improve our sight, but for it work, I'm told you have sit really still, eyes wide open, looking at nothing in particular. That's a fair analogy for silent meditation.

If Simeon had been blind to the Bible, and it's obvious that he knew his prophets well, like the passage we heard from Malachi earlier; if Simeon had been blind to the Bible it's hard to see how he could have understood, much less accepted, the promise God made to him. It's hard to see him going into the Temple and laying his eyes on a baby and seeing that he'd found what he'd been looking for. Without her persistent practice of prayer, which gave her great insight, I don't think Anna would have seen Jesus for who he was either. Between the two of them, Simeon and Anna offer a great witness and give us good role models, but there's more to the story than that.

Like Mary and Joseph, we need to be open and ready to hear things from strangers that are perplexing, even bizarre. They could have dismissed Simeon and Anna as cranks, religious-nuts, but they took them seriously. As the Body of Christ, we help bear Jesus into the world. He dwells among us as a Church and within the hearts of each, but there will be people who can see things about Jesus that we cannot, no matter how close we are to him, no matter how close he is to us. We have no monopoly on seeing Jesus for who he is.

There's so much we can learn from others, even if we dislike or disagree with them, and we need to be prepared for that, as Joseph and Mary were. To be sure, we need to be discerning about how we handle what we hear, because everyone's vision of Jesus is a skewed, but with humility, we can gain a different vantage point, and that's very valuable, no matter how strange or disorienting it might be.

To see Jesus clearly, and how we want and need to see him, we've got to look hard sometimes. It takes patience. Simeon waited a long time to lay eyes on him, and Anna prayed hard, which requires great patience. But when our vision is keen – honed by scripture and prayer and humility – what a sight there is to see.

We can see the love flowing down, erasing hatred, showing it for the lie it is. We can see hope for the future in a world where there's so much that could cause us to give up hope. We can see the potential for joy in the midst of despair. And we can see our duty, to respond faithfully to the gift, to the promise, of Jesus. Amen.