

Praise as Protest
A Sermon by Rev. Jessica C. Gregory
January 1, 2017 Epiphany Sunday
Luke 2:21-38

Waiting is hard, especially if you are a six-year-old boy and you are waiting to open presents on Christmas morning. Then, waiting is almost impossible. One morning, after my son Nathan turned over the advent calendar ornament he came to me in the kitchen, where I was busily trying to make his lunch. He was near tears and I first thought that something was wrong. And then he half exclaimed, half whined, "I cannot wait for Christmas, Mom! It is too hard!" I let out a sigh of relief. He was okay, but it was only December 2nd. It was going to be a long season of Advent in the Gregory house! Having patience when looking ahead to a special day is hard.

Having patience when looking ahead, not knowing when that special day will be, is even harder. Our Scripture passage for this morning includes two incredibly patient servants of God, Simeon and Anna. Like the Magi often celebrated on this Epiphany Sunday, they too met Jesus during his infancy. Theirs is one of only three stories that create Jesus' childhood narrative. The other is also found in Luke chapter two, and describes when the boy Jesus is alone in the temple as his parents frantically search for him. It is the Matthew story of the three wise men that we associate with this day, a day that celebrates the light of Jesus brought into the world, but the story of Simeon and Anna also has much to teach us about it.

The 112-year-old man and the 84-year-old woman have spent their lives worshipping God, waiting for God to comfort and redeem the Israelites—waiting for God to fulfill the promise made through the prophet Isaiah to restore Israel's independence: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation shall reach the ends of the earth" (49:6). They were waiting without knowing what to expect, what God's salvation would look like or when it would come, but wholeheartedly trusting the centuries' old promise that this light would come. This righteous and devout man and prophetic woman were not your average Jews. They were the Jake Arietta and Serena Williams Jews, possessing a rare, extraordinary gift of faith and ability to live in waiting. A long time widow, Anna, actually resided in the temple, where she worshipped with prayer and fasting night and day. One day, as he waited with expectation, The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would indeed see the Lord's Messiah before death—very good news for this centenarian. The wait would not be much longer.

Yousef Alarsan would give anything to have an idea when his wait for a permanent home would end. He and his wife Nour make their residence, as best as possible, in a refugee camp in Oreokastro, Greece, where they have been since June of last year. They reside in one of hundreds of tents, along with 800 other refugees, in a cavernous warehouse the size of two football fields. Yousef and Nour left their homeland Syria in late 2015 after waking up one morning to "black flags and long beards" of ISIS soldiers.

Yousef was arrested and flogged for smoking cigarettes, and then ISIS began beheading dissenters. Yousef and Nour fled for their lives, leaving behind all they knew and moving

forward into the unknown. Their lives have been in limbo for over a year now, and the uncertainty of it all is overwhelming. "I am going crazy," Yousef says. "Just be honest with us. Tell me that I will have to stay in Greece for two years; I will accept that and I will manage. But I can't just keep waiting without knowing. I would rather face ISIS, the Syrian army and the Russian bombs than this kind of life (Baker, 2016 p.49-51)." Endless waiting is nearly unbearable.

Meanwhile, in February, Nour and Yousef learned that Nour was pregnant with their first child. Then, an entirely different waiting began, but this one with an end of late September. Even in the midst of chaos, new life comes. As if in protest to their grave circumstances as nomadic refugees of no nation, Nour and Yousef find voices of praise as they welcome their daughter Rahaf. Rays of light shine through the warehouse cracks and joy finds a place to rest.

Though they must have been exhausted from the difficult journey to Bethlehem and yearning to return home to Nazareth, after Jesus' birth, as faithful Jews, Mary and Joseph, went to Jerusalem, waited the eight days required before having their newborn son circumcised and then presented him to the Lord, following what is written in the law of the Lord: "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord" (Luke 2:23). They presented him at Simeon and Anna's temple, and God made sure Simeon was present when the family of three arrived:

27 "Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple..." to see the Lord's Messiah. Simeon dropped whatever he was doing and made his way to the temple courtyard as instructed so that he arrived just as Mary, Joseph and Jesus came to worship. 28 Simeon took [Jesus] in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

After Simeon's proclamations, the prophet Anna begins praising Jesus as well, and sharing with all who were listen how this baby will redeem Israel.

God has come! In a time of Roman domination, religious struggle and much uncertainty, God has come! — a light of salvation for all peoples in a time of tyranny and darkness. God has fulfilled God's promises! There is nothing more worthy of praise, there is no better news! — and no better time for it, as the Roman powers continue to dominate at both a political and practical level, overseeing day to day activities. Religious observances were monitored and could at any time be stopped by the powers that be.

The wealthy and powerful were getting more so; the poor and marginalized pushed further down. While the economy of Judea was growing, it did so under a cloud of darkness and in the tension-filled fog created by the Romans and the Temple. Into this tension comes a light brighter than all the darkness! — into this tension God breaks in, fulfilling a promise and ushering into the world peace and hope; into this tension a Messiah is born!

And so Simeon and Anna praise God with their whole hearts and their full voices, proclaiming and celebrating Emmanuel — God with us! They offer praise, even though the Romans still dominate, even though practically their lives will be the same after meeting this eight-day-old boy as they were before. They offer praise because while life may look the same today and tomorrow, there will be a time when, through the miracles of this babe, the world will be different. Comfort and redemption for the Israelites will come. Hallelujah!

Friends, this praise is ours to proclaim as well. Seven days after celebrating Jesus' birth there is nothing left to do but to praise God for coming to us; for shining light in a way that we couldn't miss it — through the life of a man, who looked like us, talked like us and lived like us — but who was God; whose death was not the end but the beginning of a resurrection people. Jesus was shining a light into a world covered by a cloud of darkness, a world in which violence is common, refugees are many, divisions are deep, money is tight and patience is frayed. It is into this world, our world, that Jesus is born. It is into this world that peace and hope are ushered. Praise God! Praise God not as we turn away from these difficult realities but as we look them straight in the eye, filled with confidence and assurance, grounded in our faith and in our deep belief that Jesus' light does outshine all darkness. As Karoline Lewis, Associate Professor of Biblical Preaching at Luther Seminary reflected:

We offer “[P]raise of our God whose power is known and experienced in the vulnerability of humanity. Whose love is felt in pain and loss. Whose hope knows no limits. We give praise in the face of perverse power. We give praise so as to offer resistance to that which or those who would seek to instill fear instead of trust.

We give praise to shout out an alternate perspective/reality/worldview that chooses love and inclusion and compassion over hatred and exclusion and heartlessness. We give praise to affirm our belief that the world can be different, has to be different, and that that difference is known in bringing about the kingdom of God here and now.

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www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post-3469, accessed 12.23.16.

2017 can be different, and has to be, for Yousef and Nour, and their infant daughter Rahaf. Even as they live in the uncertainty of where they will call home, Yousef and Nour now focus on the responsibility of being good parents and creating safe space for their daughter. The kingdom of God is needed at the refugee camp, and now.

This new year can be different; it has to be, for the city of Chicago. More than 750 people were murdered in Chicago in 2016, 11 of them killed last weekend, on Christmas. This is a 58 percent increase over last year and the highest total since 1997. The kingdom of God is needed in our neighboring city, and now.

This new year, 2017, can be different; it has to be, for each of us and all of us. Whatever our situation, whether it be good or bad, filled with anxiety or peace, meaning or emptiness, Jesus was born! He is Emmanuel, having walked on this earth a few

decades and residing forever in our hearts. We must shine his light, nestled firmly in our souls, into our world. We are part of the Kingdom of God, here and now, and this kingdom is needed more than ever!

We must refuse to be swallowed by the grief, by the challenges and the uncertainty of this life and we must protest in praise, just like Simeon and Anna did. God could not have given us better models for this action! Like them, we are situated in a world that laughs at us for trusting in a God who is present and powerful. Like them, in these days after Christmas, we have reason to celebrate God, a faithful God who keeps promises and who has come to us. Like them, we are believers who anticipate and experience God breaking into our lives, interrupting us, and opening our eyes to see the world in a new way.

We may not be the Christian equivalent of Jake Arietta or Serena Williams, praying, studying and worshipping constantly, but that is okay. We don't need to be. We only need to let God into our thoughts, our hearts and our lives, and not let our present circumstances keep us from praising the one who made us, the one who loves us so much that he came to live with us.

Jesus has come! The waiting is over. The kingdom of God is needed—here and now—for which we wait with great expectation and hope. May this New Year be filled with words of joyful praise and actions of love! Amen.

Works Cited

Baker, Aryn, 2016. "Children of No Nation" in *Time Magazine*, Vol. 188 No. 27-28, 2016. December 26, 2016 / Jan 2, 2017 pp. 38-51.

Lewis, Karoline, 2014. "Just Praise" from Working Preacher.org Sunday, December 21, 2014. Accessed on 12/23/16 from www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post-3469.