

Christmas Eve Sermon

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First United Methodist Church of Wausau
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Luke 2

Dear Santa,

I want a Puppy. I want a playhouse. Thank you. I've been good most of the time. Sometimes I'm wild.

Dear Santa,

I'll take anything because I haven't been that good.

Dear Santa Claus,

When you come to my house there will be cookies for you. But if you are real hungry you can use our phone and order a pizza to go.

Dear Santa,

I'm not going to ask for a lot. Here's my list: The Etch-A-Sketch animator, 2 packs of #2 pencils, Crayola fat markers and the big gift...my own color TV! Well, maybe you could drop the pencils; I don't want to be really selfish.

Christmas, and the four-week Advent season leading up to it, have long been associated with waiting. When I was a child, I would stretch out with the Sears Wishbook and make my *extensive* list. Then I would have to wait for weeks to see if I got anything on it. Sometimes I did.

So, let me ask you, What are you waiting for this Christmas? Are you longing for something? What are you hoping for this Christmas?

Before I go any further, I need to be honest and say that our world has become a pretty grim place. Many good things happening yet it is hard to deny the reality of terribly things happening – in our own country and around the world.

In the midst of all that, we have two choices. We can distract ourselves from what is happening, drowning our cares in eggnog and Santa movies. We can turn up the Christmas carols to drown out the news. Or we can acknowledge the world's shadow side, and let our hearts break for the suffering in this world while at the same time letting ourselves believe that what happened on that first Christmas holds the power to bring light into every corner of the world. Because it does.

I am choosing to talk about light and hope. To do this, I bring two bible characters from just beyond the Christmas story, only days after Jesus' birth – Simeon and Anna. Simeon and Anna were each waiting with anticipation and expectation to welcome the Messiah. Each waiting for God to fulfill a promise.

Before going on, it helps to be reminded that when Jesus is born, Israel is under Roman occupation, living in fear of the cruel king. Their nation has lost sovereignty. Armed soldiers patrol the streets. Some of the people have begun to wonder if God has forgotten about them.

Luke continues his narrative, just after the angels and the shepherds, by telling his readers of Simeon. "He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him." Simeon loves God and people.

With all that is happening, Simeon is looking for restoration of his people. Why? How? Simeon has reason to hope, for “the Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ”

Simeon’s expectation is focused on the comfort that the Christ will bring. Comfort is a very real human need. At one time or another, we each struggle with loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, or desperation.

Simeon waits. And, God as Spirit eventually prompts Simeon to be in the temple courtyard at the moment Joseph and Mary are bringing their infant son for what is called Purification.

Simeon looks at Jesus and recognizes that God’s promise is now fulfilled. Here is Immanuel, God-with-Us.” He takes the child, praising God:

“Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word,
because my eyes have seen your salvation.
You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.
It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and a glory for your people Israel.”

Simeon finds what he has been waiting for. Now to Anna.

After her husband died, Anna dedicated herself to God, worshipping in the temple night and day. Like Simeon, she is waiting for the Messiah. She comes up to Mary and Joseph in the temple courtyard and begins “to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”

There’s that word *redemption* again. It is related to *captivity*. To the Jewish people, the story of the Israelites’ release from slavery in Egypt is the ultimate symbol of God’s power. A sign that God is eager to release God’s people from whatever holds us captive.

When Jesus comes, he provides those very things that Simeon and Anna re waiting for – God’s comfort, God’s freedom and release.

Let me ask again. What are you waiting for this Christmas?

Can you identify with Simeon tonight? Some of you are hurting. You feel lonely, afraid or stretched too thin. Do you need comfort? consoling? Do you need a fresh sense of God’s presence?

Jesus comes to provide consolation for us, right where we are. You can find what you need in him.

Maybe you identify more with Anna. Are you plagued with guilt because of something you have done or the way you have been living? Do you feel trapped in patterns of life from which you cannot break free? Christ Jesus can help with this too, right now.

I would suggest three action steps to help you know God’s comfort and wholeness this Christmas.

First, marvel. Mary and Joseph marvel at what has happened and what they have heard about Jesus. To marvel is to be filled with wonder, astonishment and surprise.

Do you marvel this Christmas? Or, are you too caught up in the busyness and stress of the season? Do you struggle to find anything *holy* about the holidays? Has Christmas become too familiar? You've heard the Christmas story so often that it no longer amazes you.

Our celebration of Christmas can anesthetize us to its reality. We hear just enough of the story to keep us from noticing the depth and breadth of this Christmas miracle.

An idea that might help you recapture an awe of Christmas is to pick one of the characters of the narrative. Step into their sandals. Imagine yourself as Mary or Joseph, the innkeeper, a shepherd, Simeon, Anna, one of the wise men. Witness the unfolding of the story from the inside.

A second action step is to move. Both Simeon and Anna were movers. Anna "approached at that very moment and began to praise God." Simeon was "led by the Spirit, [and] went into the temple area" (---).

Joseph took Mary and went to Bethlehem. The wise men saw a star and were compelled to follow where it led.

In each case, when the Holy Spirit prompted them to move, they moved. They didn't stay put. What if they had not responded?

When God prompts you to do something, you need to do it. For some of you, it might be the saving of your life. For others, it might mean surrender. God as Spirit may lead you toward or away, into service or into silence and calm.

Where do notice God as Spirit nudging right now? Are you willing to move?

Simeon said one thing that must have taken Mary's breath away: "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition."

No "Merry Christmas" here. Indeed, Simeon might have preferred to keep quiet but God called him to say it. This is our third action step. We allow ourselves to become messengers.

A sometimes hard truth is that Christ splits people into two camps. Simeon warns Mary that Christ will cause the falling and rising of many. Because of who Jesus is and what he comes to do, people are forced to make a decision about him.

As the bible reminds us, Jesus is either the rock on which you build your life or he is the rock that you stumble over. God calls each of us to decide. And based on our response, we rise or fall. You cannot remain neutral. You're moving closer to God, or further away.

Interestingly, as we practice marveling, we cannot help but move as well. This leads us – as we follow God's call on our lives – to become messengers.

We all know people who have been caught up in the busyness of Christmas. Maybe their activity represents an inner search for comfort and wholeness – those very things Christ provides. God calls us to be messengers of the Christmas story.

As we begin to marvel again, the wonder of Christmas will astonish us. Then, as we begin to move as our need for wholeness is met. We too notice moments when we can share the message of Christ and how he offers what we need.

Christmas is a marvelous message.

Amen.