

SEE THE SAVIOR
Luke 2:1-40
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First Mennonite Church
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Faithful waiting: Waiting to conceive a child. Waiting through the nine months of pregnancy. Waiting through the centuries with the people of Israel, under occupation and in exile. Waiting for rebirth, waiting to be restored and saved.

Faithful watching; Watching through the night. Watching for a sign from God, for the dawn to break from on high, for the light to shine. Watching for the Messiah to appear.

Luke launches his Gospel account with the intertwined themes of waiting and watching, woven through with echoes from the prophecy of Isaiah.

Elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah wait for the blessing of a child to remove their shame. They wait for John to be born and for Zechariah to regain his speech. They watch for a mighty savior to be raised up in the house of David (1:69) and for light to come to those who sit in darkness (1:79).

Teenager Mary, betrothed to Joseph, waits for her roles as wife and mother to be fulfilled. She waits for the baby announced by Gabriel to be born. She watches the responses to her pregnancy and to the newborn baby and anticipates, as Pastor Cindy told us last Sunday, the upside-down kingdom of peace and justice (1:46-55).

The birth of Jesus brings into focus others who are waiting and watching. Some are young like Mary and some old like Elizabeth. Like both Elizabeth and Mary, the others who wait and watch stand outside the power structure of ancient Palestine.

The shepherds wait through the night out in the fields, watching over their flocks. Theirs is the active waiting of loyal laborers. The shepherds are young boys with no social status. Like all the poor and lowly, they look for a day with better prospects. Like all youth, they dream of fulfillment. Like all Israelites, they know a Messiah has been promised.

Simeon and Anna, the aged wise ones, wait and watch in the house of the Lord. As a widow, Anna is socially and economically vulnerable, a marginal figure who offers a prophetic witness from the margin. Simeon has no formal religious status either, but rather gains his authority through the Holy Spirit. Theirs is the active waiting of faithful believers. Their energies are devoted to prayer, fasting, and devout worship. Each has waited patiently, through many decades of life, watching for the Messiah.

Now the waiting and watching is over. The Gospel story zooms in on a wondrous sign: a newborn baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger (2:12).

The marginalized young people out in the fields are the first to be told of this sign. From the angel of the Lord they hear the proclamation “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:11). This is the good news of great joy: a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord has been born!

The shepherds decide to go to Bethlehem “and see this thing that has taken place” (2:15). Once they see the child in the manger, the shepherds become active witnesses; they “made known what had been told them” (2:17) and glorified and praised God “for all they had heard and seen” (2:20).

This seeing, this encounter with the baby in the manger, equips the shepherds to share the amazing news with others. For as the angel told them, this news of the Savior’s birth is “for all the people” (2:10). Unlettered rural teenagers become the first evangelists!

Forty days later, Simeon is guided by the Holy Spirit to interact with Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus in the courts of the Jerusalem Temple, where the parents have come to fulfill the religious obligations associated with a firstborn son. Simeon cradles Jesus in his arms and praises God with the words, “my eyes have seen your salvation” (2:30). Anna joins them and begins “to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38).

Anna and Simeon have cultivated the inner sight of the spiritually devout. In the midst of the crowded temple complex, they catch sight of the little baby and recognize who he is. Simeon and Anna see the Savior and declare him a light for all peoples. Powerless senior citizens become the next evangelists!

The young parents are also amazed witnesses to the newborn Savior king. Mary and Joseph listen intently to the shepherds’ account and to Simeon’s song and blessing (2:18; 2:33-34). As instructed by the angel Gabriel (1:31), they name the child Jesus, which means “God saves.”

Joseph’s role as sketched by Luke is to guide the family to the City of David, a place honored in Israel’s royal history, and to accompany Mary in the carrying out of the requirements of the Jewish law. Mary has the foreground role and Luke tracks her deepening discernment.

After the shepherds visit them, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (2:19) “All these words” = what the angel told the shepherds = “to you is born this day . . . a Savior.”

Simeon’s second speech is addressed specifically to Mary: “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-- and a sword will pierce your own soul too” (2:34b-35). Now the full import of the Messiah’s destiny is articulated. Many will rise, yet many will fall, for there will be opposition to Jesus and his message. Although Jesus has come to save all, not all will believe. As for Mary herself, “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (2:35b).

What does it mean that Mary’s soul - her whole being - will be run through with a sword? Some scholars say this image foreshadows the pain and grief of seeing Jesus put to death on the cross. But another interpretation sees a connection with Ezekiel 14:17 ““Let a sword pass through the land,¹ and I cut off human beings and animals from it.”

Raymond Brown, who has written extensively about the birth narratives, says: “The image is of a selective sword of judgment, destroying some and sparing others, a sword of discriminations and not merely of punishment. . . . Simeon proclaims that a discriminating judgment will come upon Israel and that it will touch Mary too, as an individual Israelite.”¹ Theologian Elizabeth Johnson elaborates: “Hearing the word of God and keeping it will not happen easily but will require struggle to arrive at

¹Raymond E. Brown, “The Presentation of Jesus (Luke 2:22-40),” *Worship* 51, no. 1 (January 1977), 9.

wisdom. Miriam of Nazareth will be tested in the depths of her faith.”² This realization adds nuance to the experience of seeing the newborn savior.

Seeing the baby Jesus as savior means more than taking in the wonder and glory of the angels’ proclamation and hastening to the manger. It means more than hearing the testimony of the shepherds and the sages in the temple and praising God for the salvation that has been prepared for all.

Seeing Jesus as savior also means embracing the child whom many will oppose. For Mary, it means accepting that Jesus finds his true home in his father’s house (Luke 2:41-52) and his true family among his followers (Luke 8:19-21).³ Thus Luke anticipates already here the call to costly discipleship, the need to grow in wisdom and truth along with the child and to join the band of his disciples, as Mary his mother does in Luke-Acts.

There is rich complexity in the image of the baby as savior. Often, the visual image is the child lying in the manger. Most often, it is Mary holding the Christ child. Today, with gender equality in mind, let us also claim the image of Simeon, cradling the baby in his arms. How do these images speak to us? Do you feel that you have been waiting and watching, wondering when and how God would break into your life? Don’t we all long to see the Savior?

To see the Savior in the baby Jesus is:

- to acknowledge the sacredness and wonder of all new life.
- to lift up a child of poverty.⁴
- to keep company with smelly shepherds and geriatric prophets.
- to honor vulnerability and humility.
- to trust in God’s Word rather than human measures of greatness.
- to join Mary in learning discernment and discipleship.

Most of all, to see the Savior in the baby Jesus is *to be called to spiritual rebirth*.

The waiting and watching is over. Now the wrestling with faith and discipleship begins. The active formation that requires us to model ourselves on the Word made flesh, to take the miracle into our everyday lives, as the family of Jesus did: “When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him” (2:39-40).

How good that Christmas comes every single year! For so our spiritual grooming in kingdom values begins again in earnest. We get to start fresh, to grow up with Jesus and walk with Jesus, to learn the depths of God’s love and recognize the marks of the divine in ourselves and each other. In him, we seek to be transformed by the renewing of our minds so as to discern the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2), to be imitators of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1), and to be born spiritually from above (John 3:3). “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

Christ the Lord is born! Praise God! “[A]ll flesh shall see the salvation of God” (Luke 3:6).

² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 281.

³See Paula Gooder, *The Meaning is in the Waiting* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009), chapter four.

⁴This socio-economic portrait fits with what archaeology is finding; recent newspaper stories tell about the excavation of a humble Nazareth dwelling from the time of Jesus.