

Zechariah's Song: *Benedictus*
Simeon's Song: *Nunc Dimittis*

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on Luke 1:67-79, 2:27-33
on December 24, 2017 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

Some years ago in the weeks before Christmas, the *New York Times* told the story of a music teacher named David Storch who checked out a copy of the score for Handel's *Messiah* from the Brooklyn Public Library. The library was busy that day, you see, and David's transaction mistakenly did not get recorded. But of course it was the season for interest in Handel's great work, and with each request that came in for that score, the library staff ran circles in the stacks trying in vain to locate the missing *Messiah*, not knowing that it had been checked out. On the day he returned the score and placed it on the circulation desk, David was startled to hear a quick and loud exclamation from the librarian behind the desk: "The *Messiah* is back! The *Messiah* is back!!" As the *New York Times* recorded the story, "every head in the library turned toward the voice, but alas, 'a few minutes later, everyone went back to work.'"

We gather here this Christmas Eve morning to finalize our preparations for the Christ child. The flurry and fury of the season may have some of us feeling like those library workers — running from shopping to parties to family to cooking to church to festivities, in a vain attempt to locate that *Messiah*. Others of us may feel like the preoccupied library patrons, willing to glance up for a glimpse at the hubbub, but not

so much that it really changes anything. Either way, we hear again the promise that through Advent, we wait for the birth of Jesus, and at Christmas, we receive him.

Zechariah and Simeon were two who learned how to wait for the Messiah and then receive him. These two men, these characters in our Christmas narrative that serve to frame the birth of Jesus, do so with a song of blessing on their lips. Zechariah, elderly husband of Elizabeth and honorable priest to the Jews for many years, was paid a visit from the angel Gabriel. As he did with Mary, Gabriel told Zechariah to not be afraid, because after decades of barrenness, the Lord has heard their cry. Elizabeth will bear a son named John, he of locusts and honey and repentance for all, a son who will prepare a people for the coming of the Lord. But unlike Mary who marveled with news of a miraculous son, Zechariah wanted proof. "My wife and I aren't getting in younger! How will I know you're telling the truth?," he asked in response, to which Gabriel silenced Zechariah until the angel's words came to fulfillment.

Nine months later, baby John was born. And on the eighth day as was their custom, the faithful Zechariah and Elizabeth came to the temple to circumcise their baby and, among their beloved community, give him a name. "His is to be called John," she said to a disbelieving crowd who knew no John in the lineage of his father. With a stroke of his pen, Zechariah confirmed it: "his name is John." And after nine silent months while his son grew in his mother's womb, Zechariah's lips unsealed and out

came a song of praise to God, a blessing for the Holy One who will send a Savior for their redemption.

Some months later, the gospel story returns to another faithful, elderly priest back in that same temple, a priest with a song to sing in response to the birth of a baby. This one from Simeon, elderly and obedient watchman for the coming of the Messiah. It's forty days after the birth of Jesus, and Mary and Joseph have traveled to the temple to fulfill their religious obligations for the baby, presenting him to God with a sacrifice of two turtledoves. Like Zechariah before him, Simeon was prompted by the Divine, there in the temple that day of the holy family's visit because of a nudge from the Holy Spirit. And as he took the infant Christ into his arms, Simeon knew — he can receive God's good gift, he can let down his guard, he can depart from his post, he can be dismissed in peace. "For my eyes have seen your salvation," he sang, his voice worn out from years of life but his eyes alight with God's promise glimpsed in the face of a baby.

For Zechariah and for Simeon, these bookends of the holy birth, how might their songs compel us to respond this year to God's unexpected gifts? In waiting and receiving, what might they teach us about the posture in which to experience the fulfillment of God's promises to us?

Perhaps for you, this Advent season has been one filled with the darkness of these winter days. The firelight of love that you once enjoyed has dimmed or extinguished all together. Loneliness has become an

unwelcome guest. Anger and anxiety set your mind and your mouth ablaze with complaint, fear, and nervous chatter. Like Zechariah, you have a need for validation and proof in the midst of the waiting — that there can still be hope, that peace isn't just a pipe dream, that joy isn't just for the already-joyful, and that love is more than a memory or a dream. And in the absence of an answer, your praise goes mute. "How will I know that something good is out there for me?," you cry out. "My life is a mess, and this season only makes it worse. I don't see any relief anywhere!"

It is to you I ask — how might your experience of Christmas this year be different if your waiting — even in these final stages — felt purposeful, that even if you don't yet have the song of praise to sing, your silence was one filled with listening and readying so that when the time comes, melody can burst forth from your lips to God's ears? What will it take for your waiting for God to keep from descending into passivity, so that you are ready for the consolation and fulfillment when it arrives?

Or maybe for you, the celebration of this season and its story isn't a stretch. You have filled your home and your days with favored traditions and guests. You have always been obedient to the Christian life. You have attended to all your tasks, and like Simeon, are ready for your long faithfulness to draw to a close.

It is to you I encourage — how might you recognize the unexpected gift of Jesus this year? What posture will you assume to receive the Christ child? How will you intentionally listen for the Spirit's guidance so that you

know Jesus when you see him? Will your work of Christmas be the work of holding a baby, and might you still be surprised by God's unexpected presence?

It's like that great story about the woman who, when trying to multi-task her Christmas to do's, asked her teenaged grocery store clerk if he had any Christmas postage stamps she could purchase. "No," the bored guy said to her, "we just have the Liberty Bell and some lady holding a baby."

Filled with the canticles of Christmas — the songs of the angels, of Mary, of Zechariah and Simeon — the Gospel of Luke tells us time and time again that God came to them, God fulfilled the hopes long-promised to the world. And best of all, God did so in the most unexpected, unconventional way, where "some lady holding a baby" changed the world. To those who waited and watched, to those who prepared and those who were surprised, to the terrified and the delighted, God came then and God comes now. "The Messiah is back!" And now what?

The great Madeline L'Engle says it best:

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war and hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn

That time runs out and the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honor and truth were trampled by scorn —
Yet here did the Savior make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn —
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

Pastoral Prayer of Love

God of these waiting days, we arrive on this Christmas Eve morning with our hearts full and heavy, our hands restless and empty, our arms overflowing and aching, our mouths silent and eager. For you above anyone know that the things of this world contain both hope and fear, peace and violence, joy and sorrow, love and death. And yet we wait, Advent God, trusting that Emmanuel really will be with us.

Come quickly Lord, our love is in you.

God of Zechariah, we too wait impatiently and hungrily for your promises in our life to be fulfilled. Too many of us live with hatred; too few of us live with love. We worry what it would be like to love beyond walls, to love boundlessly, to love abundantly. Our minds fill with doubts, and thus our mouths fall silent in the face of injustice and prejudice. Reorient our minds, o God, and fill our mouths with promise of Isaiah that those who walk in darkness will see a great light.

Come quickly Lord, our love is in you.

God of Simeon, we too long to fill our arms with your many gifts, to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that the things we long for will be ours through you. Too many of us live with emptiness; too few of us with abundance. We hurt when loved ones leave us, when healthy ones fall

afflicted, when deep wishes find no home. Redirect our truest longings, o God, and fill our arms with the baby that changes everything.

Come quickly Lord, our love is in you.

God of Joseph, we too worry that our hands are idle, or busy, or misguided from what you dream for them. Too many of us have little to eat; too few of us are willing to share. We desire to set things right, to live justly in your created world, to love each other well. So reclaim your purpose for our lives, o God, and fill our hands with the love you so freely shared in Christ.

Come quickly Lord, our love is in you.

Come quickly Lord 3x