

**“The end is only the beginning”**  
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**First Baptist Church on Fifth**  
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The end of the Christmas story is only the beginning.

You don't have to answer this question out loud, but how many of you all are willing to admit that you are glad Christmas is over? The hustle and bustle of the holiday season is a lot of stress to take on. Don't get me wrong, I love celebrating Christmas, and it brings so much joy, but it is a lot of work.

Well, I'm here to tell you today that, after we've spent the past few weeks of Advent thinking through the Christmas story, the narrative of Jesus' birth is only the beginning.

Yes, the stress of the Christmas season may be over, but in the days after Christmas, our lives carry on. You might take a few days off work or spend a little extra time with family and friends before the new year begins, work calendars become filled, the children go back to school, and long-distance relatives make their way back to the places they call home.

Christmas is over, and we keep on going.

Today's sermon text tells us how Jesus kept on going, too. Because as we all know, just because the Christmas story is well-known and popular, the way Jesus was brought into the world is only the beginning of what the gospel writers tell us about his life.

Today's text comes from the beginning of Luke, in chapter 2, verses 22-40. Baby Jesus has just been born and was named one verse before this pericope begins.

Some time has passed, but Luke doesn't tell us how much, exactly, and Jesus is now being presented at the Temple. Mary and Joseph offer two turtle doves as a sacrifice — just like the Christmas song tells us — when they present young Jesus before the Lord.

It is at this time when the Holy Spirit rests on a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. Simeon, Luke tells us, was looking forward to the “consolation of Israel.” In verse 26, the Spirit reveals to him that he “would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.” The Spirit guided Simeon to the Temple, and when he saw Jesus, verse 27 says he “took him in his arms and praised God.”

He was ecstatic to see Jesus. Overjoyed, in fact, at the sight of this little boy who would bring together Jews and Gentiles in his ministry of love, peace, and justice.

Simeon's monologue is famous among Christians around the holidays. Understandably so. We are excited for the Christmas season, and believe in the joy that it represents. It is a thrill of hope! It is something worth rejoicing about!

And the sight of Jesus in our nativity scenes, the recollection of his birth narratives, the decorations adorning our towns, these are all reminders that he is among us. Despite all the

stressful things throughout the Christmas season that went into our preparation for the holiday, Christmas day reminds us that Jesus is here to help relieve us of these burdens.

His entry into the temple was a sign of something great.

After Simeon's monologue, there is a second proclamation made by someone named, Anna. Anna was a prophet.

In verses 36-38 Luke tells us, "There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

She, too, saw Jesus and knew that it was just the beginning of something great.

When I read this story, I imagine Anna with a similar stature to the one I remember my grandmother having, who lived until she was 93. "Hey Ms. Challis!" The nurses would shout from across the hallway at Trinity Oaks nursing home. She loved to tell stories about the pictures hanging on her wall, or sit outside in the garden and talk. Whatever it was, she always had something important to say to the beloved person standing in front of her.

Nothing stopped her — not age, gender, or mobility — from sharing love and life with her community.

Likewise, I think Anna the Prophet, frail due to fasting and lack of sleep, compounded with the effects of aging in the ancient Mediterranean world, was a source of love and life for the people around her. She made it known when she had something to say, not because she was a loudmouth but because she had important things to say.

When she saw Mary and Joseph bring young Jesus into that Temple — that Temple in which she had spent so much time fasting and praying for her fallen world — she knew that he was important, too. And while Anna's proclamation of Jesus in the Temple often gets overshadowed by the attention we give to Simeon, and although Luke offers us less of a glimpse into her actual dialogue as he tells her story, I think what she has to say here is important.

Amid the stress and struggles that her community, her family, or Anna herself was experiencing, the sight of Jesus was a moment worthy of pausing to praise. Pausing to acknowledge that despite hunger pangs from fasting so often, or the tiredness she felt from constantly being in prayer, the Lord heard her cries and sent a child who would change the world in front of her. Anna, in her fragile yet faithful state, was a witness to the beginning of something great.

And as 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, it might do us some good to pause like Anna did when she saw sweet little Jesus enter the Temple, and reflect on how we might carry on with his story after the holiday season stops reminding us of it. Pausing to realize that while the stress and excitement of the Christmas story — the uncomfortable traveling for the census, no room at the inn, the controversy of her pregnancy — all that is over when Jesus is finally laid quietly in his manger, his story, and our story, is not.

Sometimes I read this story and wonder, were Simeon and Anna the only ones who took the time to pause for Jesus in this moment?

Luke doesn't tell us that there was a crowd of people hanging around in the Temple, awaiting the Messiah's entry that day. Maybe Simeon and Anna were the only ones who really saw Jesus, who really recognized his presence, out of a multitude of people who simply saw Jesus.

We don't even know if the Temple was crowded with religious parishioners at all that day. Perhaps Anna and Simeon, along with the Rabbis working there, were the only ones who witnessed Jesus' presence that day. And perhaps it would be years before anyone else found the time to take a pause to recognize their Messiah's work at hand.

But, however the scene may have actually looked, Luke's story tells us for certain that these two faithful believers saw the potential for greatness in Jesus. Although it would be years before his ministry would begin, Anna and Simeon saw little Jesus and recognized that their wait for something glorious to come would soon be over. You see, Luke is marking the end of Jesus' birth narrative, not by closing the books on one particularly interesting story of a boy born in Bethlehem, but by showing readers that the frenzy of his birth, and that calm and silent night, was only the very beginning of a story that would change the lives of believers forever.

But the writer of this gospel has an arial view of the story. When Luke is writing his Gospel in 90 CE, 20 years after the destruction of the Temple, and 60 years removed from the crucifixion, he knows how the story ends. He knows that these prophecies come true, and that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah that Anna and Simeon were waiting for. His hindsight allows him to tell a story that is absolutely going to be about hope, because while he is writing he is living in the after-effects of how Jesus lived the rest of his life following his arrival in the Temple that day.

Without that hindsight, it's hard to hold true to an inspiring message of hope, especially when we are neck-deep in stressful, uncomfortable, or tough situations. Just imagine how Mary must have felt the moment she learned she was pregnant with Jesus, or when she learned she would have to give birth to him in a barn filled with animals. Surely, she was worried about how God's plan was working out!

And let's be honest, we've all been in situations when we're confused at what God is trying to do here. Times when we're thinking, "God, when is this going to be over?" are not often the times we consider the beginnings of great stories. Just like Luke, that often comes with hindsight.

This summer, I felt a little bit like that when I attended the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship's General Assembly for the first time in Atlanta, Georgia. I enjoyed the assembly, don't get me wrong. In fact, I met a couple of you all there, not realizing I would join your beloved church community in just a few months.

At the time, I was a youth ministry intern at Providence Baptist Church, and was attending the assembly as a learning experience with my supervisor, Dane Jackson. And let me tell you, by the end of the assembly, I felt like I had run a marathon. Meeting new people, attending luncheons, going to workshops and classes and informational sessions . . . There was so much to do in so little time.

The feeling was similar to the way I felt the first time I heard Billy Joel's iconic song, "We Didn't Start the Fire," which rapidly calls out important events in history and us listeners only get a 13-second chorus every few verses to process everything that had been sung. It took a few tries before I finally felt like I could listen to that song without losing my breath.

In fact, while we were at the General Assembly, the rock band Fall Out Boy released a cover of the song, updating the historical events to cover the last 34 years of history since Billy Joel's song was released. Listening to that song for the first time also feels a little like running a marathon.

But I digress, on the first day of the assembly, I remember milling around what was called the "Gathering Place." I stopped by informational table after informational table saying, "Hi, my name is Mallory, and I'm new here!" I was trying so hard to remember everyone's names, get information, while at the same time having my hands filled with flyers, business cards, and free stickers that were given to me at almost every table.

I was flustered because there were people *everywhere*, and they all seemed to know exactly what they were doing, who they wanted to talk to, and how to navigate the crowded room without pausing every few seconds to read the signs posted all around saying where things were. But I couldn't do that.

And then, suddenly, I turned a corner and saw the Baptist News Global table, giving out sticky notes and pens advertising our site. I was the Clemons Fellow at BNG this past academic year and have continued writing for them since then, so *these* people and *this* information was familiar to me.

When I saw the table, I thought to myself, "Finally! People that I know!" People that I had talked with on the phone or had Zoom conversations with, who already knew who I was. And I knew who they were. I didn't even have to introduce myself.

After handshakes and hugs, I was right at home.

Stress over.

To be honest, I felt a little bit like Anna, ready to rejoice at their sight. I had gotten through my young Baptist birth-narrative, so to speak, of making social connections, learning about different committees and organizations throughout CBF life, and becoming overwhelmed at it all. And the sight of my colleagues was a breath of fresh air that reminded me I would make it through the next few days. It was just the beginning.

But it wasn't just the General Assembly this year that was a stressful, marathon-like event. There are many seasons throughout the year that feel like a whirlwind. I, for one, was so busy traveling for work and moving around different places this year that just last week, after moving in and out of two different apartments, two trips to Texas, a trip to Slovakia, a trip to Baltimore, a trip to Atlanta, the beach, and one last vacation, the handle on my beloved suitcase broke.

And if our material objects cannot even handle that much stress in a year, how do you think our bodies, minds, and spirits are doing by the end of the year?

Since January, many of us have gone through exam season, graduation season, back-to-school season, [insert the sport you or your child plays] season, job-hunting season, house-hunting season, seasons of health scares, seasons of loss, seasons of financial difficulty. The list goes on.

And we already mentioned the holiday season.

I mean, talk about stress! Do I have enough wrapping paper? Is my niece going to like her gift? Will I miss my flight? How am I going to make sure my casserole stays hot during the car ride between my house and grandma's? ... Will Christmas ever be the same without that beloved family member who died?

Even during the "most wonderful time of the year," there seem to always be reasons that we are running around doing unexpected tasks, dealing with hard things, or just worrying. Just like my suitcase, we, ourselves, might feel tattered and worn. Just like Simeon and Anna, who saw the broken world in front of them and longed for a savior to help, we, too, need to be reminded that something great is coming. There is reason to hope.

And today is The End.

This is the time of year we have all been anticipating, when many of us have a moment to just breathe and take it all in before we must go back to school or work (or both) in the New Year. And although our worries and struggles and strife don't go away when the clock strikes midnight, we often see the new year as a new beginning. A time when we can metaphorically start over as 2024 begins, leaving our broken suitcases in 2023.

But, in the same way that Luke reminds us how the ending of Jesus' birth narrative is not the End of his important story, the ending of 2023 is not the End of ours. Of course not.

I mean, stress and strife, loss and grief, those things are products of living a full life. It is the happenings within our beloved communities that bring us alive! Yes, life can be hard. Some of you may be overjoyed that, come midnight, you will be able to throw last year's calendar away and recover from the race that was 2023. Because having to constantly keep up with these seasons of life can feel like we're running a marathon.

*And*, I'm here to tell you today, when we cross the finish line, there is a joyous scene ahead.

If you've ever run in a race, whether it was a marathon, a 5 K, or the potato sack race during your elementary school field day, you know that feeling of pressure. You can feel the seam of your sock chafing your skin or the hair falling out of your ponytail and into your eyes. *When will this be over?* And when it is over, your friends and family are cheering for you. Cold water is handed to you. Maybe you get a medal, or maybe you just feel really accomplished that you did that.

The end of your race was the beginning of these great moments of joy, relief, excitement, or accomplishment.

I think this is why people like running.

For the very same reason, I think this is why we love the Christmas story. It reminds us that the birth story of our savior, God made flesh, does not exist without the same stressful feelings we, too, experience today.

We love the song “Mary, Did You Know?” because it lets us wonder about what kind of feelings she was experiencing when she found out that she was going to miraculously have a baby. We ponder over what conversations sounded like between Joseph and Mary when, before they were married, they had to decide what to do about her pregnancy. We imagine what it was like to travel for days on the cusp of labor because of a legal decree requiring your family to report for a historically unprecedented census, then realize there is no room at the inn moments before going into labor. I mean, how stressed would you all be if someone told you that the only place your child could be born was in an un-sanitized barn filled with animals?

But then, on Christmas morning, that stress is over. The baby has arrived.

Just for a moment —before he starts crying again, or needs milk, before they must travel back to Nazareth — Mary and Joseph have a moment to pause and rejoice in the wonder of their newborn baby Jesus.

And today’s sermon text tells us that, although Mary and Joseph were feeling this stress on a very personal level, the whole world also needed the calming presence of Jesus.

Luke tells us that both Simeon and Anna were rejoicing at the presence of a Messiah because the people needed help. Although his ministry was not going to start for another 30 years, the sight of Jesus was the thrill of hope that the world needed. And Simeon and Anna knew when little Jesus was taken into the Temple that day, that their worries about the world, their worries about when the Messiah would come to save it, all that was over.

It was the beginning of a glorious new day.

So, as we close the books on 2023, let us rejoice in my refrain: The end is only the beginning.

Something great is afoot, my friends, because Jesus is among us doing his ministry of love, peace, and justice every day. So, as we begin again, entering the new seasons of stress and strife that this new year will bring, remember to pause and rejoice. Allow your body, mind, and spirit to process what has been happening for the past year. Be excited for what is to come.

And throw away your broken suitcase.

Jesus has arrived, stress and all. And although we may take down our Christmas lights, he is not going anywhere, for there is important and exciting work to be done.