

“Unlikely Heralds: Poised for Hope”
by Rev. David J. Wood
First Sunday of Christmas
December 28, 2025
First Congregational Church of Camden

Luke 2: 25-38

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother 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.’

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 for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped 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.

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This Sunday, that first one after Christmas Day and the last one in the calendar year – always has a feeling of being “in between,” suspended between what has been and what is yet to be. It is a time for a collective pause; perhaps a chance to get our bearings...I can think of no better characters for us to keep company with in this time than Simeon and Anna.

A little background: it is 40 days after the birth of Jesus...little more than a month has past since that night in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary have brought their infant son to the Temple to do their law abiding duty. They are a law-abiding family. We know they follow Caesar's decrees. We now know they attend, no less, to the Laws of God...

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The usual offering made as a lamb – but if the family was poor, a much less costly offering could be made instead, such as turtle doves or young pigeons...which is what they brought. All this gives us an insight into the family situation into which Jesus was born: they were poor.

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At the entrance to the Temple we find Simeon and Anna. While they are clearly Temple people...they are not Priests or Scholars of the Law. They are not part of the institutional hierarchy or power structure of authority in the Temple. As is so often true of the characters who so up in the birth stories of Jesus, we have characters who are peripheral to power. Even here at the very center of religious power...the two who are brought to the foreground are the outliers...not the officials. They are there for reasons of piety and devotion.

It is noteworthy that they are named...no one else is besides Joseph and Mary and Jesus. Not the shepherds, not the wise men...but these two are named. It is relatively uncommon in the Gospels, beyond the disciples, to name those who encounter Jesus. More often than not, they are named by their condition or station: a blind man, publican, lame man, a paralytic, a Centurion.

These are two special people bridging past and future, old and new, birth and death... and they stand out because of their genuine devotion to the things of God.

They are both elderly. We don't know how old Simeon is...just that he proclaims that his life is now complete and that he is ready to die. Anna is 84...and widowed after only 7 years of marriage. Elderly characters are common in the OT...actually VERY elderly. But elderly characters are hard to come by in the New Testament. All central characters in the NT are young. From what we know of the Disciples, they all die at a relatively young age.

Jesus is killed at age 33. Only John is said to die in old age. In our reading, we have one of the FEW places in the Bible where elderly are placed in the foreground. What characterizes both of them is a longing, an expectation, a searching for the purposes of God to be revealed...open..receptive...attuned...

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They stand out at the only two characters to recognize Jesus on their own...no arresting angelic visitation or revelatory dreams. No celestial star to guide them. Unlike the shepherds or Mary or Joseph or the Wise Men... their recognition of Jesus seems to be the fruit of a habit of anticipation and expectation: They find him...recognize him...name him...proclaim him. I don't think it's claiming too much to say that they are more with it, discerning than any other characters in the narrative.

They exemplify what it means to live long and well, to be matured by life...to cultivate a habit of keeping their eyes and hearts open, receptive to the promise, to the possibility of God. These two display the vitality of an ancient, aged faith. They speak to us of a knowledge of God that comes only with TIME...through life experience...of faithfulness, of pain, of practice, of a patient attentiveness.

Simeon declares after seeing the infant Jesus and taking him into his arms: "I can die in peace. My eyes have seen your salvation for all people...jews and gentiles alike!" Anna spreads the word of hope. These two characters exemplify how aging can bring a deep, expansiveness of the soul.

They are poised for hope. A posture they have cultivated over a lifetime. Among other things, they are reminders that hope is a practice. Hope is not sentimental...couched in Simeon's hopeful words to...are the warnings of suffering and opposition. He turns to Mary and says, "a sword will pierce your own soul too."

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The hope of Anna & Simeon is a hope that counters both despair and optimism.

Despair descends upon us when all sense of the future, is lost to us. To use a metaphor from in NEWS of late, to feel despair is to feel that the future has entirely redacted from our imagination. The future is lost to us when it appears as nothing more than a mirror image of what we find so troubling in the present.

Hope is the counter to despair in that it keeps the door of the present ajar to the future... just enough so the light gets in. And there is light...that is at the heart of Christian hope. Sometimes we have to hold the door open for one another. We need one another if hope is to thrive. (It is not a surprise that we find Simeon and Anna side by side.)

**Optimism is not the same as hope**...it simply cannot do the work that HOPE does...If despair knows too little about the future, optimism claims to know too much. If despair is a denial of the future, optimism is a denial of the present. It avoids (even dismisses) the struggles and difficulties of the present by leaping into a fabricated future.

**Hope has a different character**...hope keeps our eyes wide open reality of any given moment...at the same time, it nurtures a sense for a future...without knowing exactly what that is...

Hope is much more open than despair.  
Hope far more humble than optimism.

Simeon and Anna...the company we need to keep in this in between time we are in. They stand and witnesses to a Hope that counters optimism and despair. They are yet one more reminder that Christmas is not a child's story. To be sure, it's a story we tell children and want them to know...but it is a story that points beyond the innocence of childhood, when death and suffering is utterly inconceivable .

Christmas is a story that calls us to practice a hope that holds up in the face of death... amidst all our fallings and risings...all the fallings and risings in our world.

Faith is to hear the melody of the Kingdom.  
Hope is to dance to it.

As we stand, poised on the threshold of a new year, let's have Simeon and Anna take the lead.

Amen.