

Waiting Patiently

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"Simeon's Song of Praise" by Rembrandt

Prayer of Illumination

God, grant us to be silent before you, that we may hear you, at rest in you; that you may work in us, open to you; that you may enter, empty before you; that you may fill us. Let us be still and know that you are our God.

Amen

Scripture: Luke 2:22-40 (NRSV)

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every first born male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." 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 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.

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.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – Waiting Patiently

Butterflies are amazing creatures. I've always been fascinated by them. Each October I try to visit the Tucson Botanical Gardens to see the butterflies. Growing up in the Midwest, in the summer there are an abundance of caterpillars, much to my parents' dismay, taking over trees and bushes. Once as a child, I collected a few of the fuzzy creatures and put them in a can I found in the garage. I gave them grass and water and cared for them as best as my 8-year-old self could without the help of the internet. One day, after I'd forgotten about them, I looked into the can and there I found most were dead, but one had spiraled itself into a tiny, tight, white cocoon. I checked another day and there was small opening at the bottom. I watched and waited and waited and waited. I couldn't take it anymore! I had to help the little guy! It was struggling so hard to force its body through the tiny little hole. So, I went and got some scissors and snipped off the remaining bit of the cocoon. The butterfly emerged easily, but its body was too big and its wings were tiny and shriveled. And I remember watching it crawl around the bottom of the can and thinking, that doesn't look like a butterfly at all. My Mom finally caught on to my bug experiment and quickly set the insect free into our yard.

It wasn't until years later that I read somewhere that the restricting cocoon and the struggle required for the butterfly to get through the tiny opening were actually forcing fluid from the body of the butterfly into its wings so that it would be ready for flight once it achieved its freedom from the cocoon. The beautiful butterfly needs the wait and struggle to be strong enough to fly! I just wasn't patient enough to let it happen.

WAIT! Is one of the worst words to a child...or even adults. "Just be patient." Another phrase I could live without.

Anna and Simeon were models of patience. As I read today's scripture, it was Anna and Simeon's waiting that caught my attention this time. When Anna sees Simeon holding baby Jesus up, it's then she sweeps in and declares the identity of the infant as the Messiah to everyone around her. Anna was married for seven years and widowed for 84 years. Anna waited at the temple for 84 years. She is said to never have left the Temple, praying unceasingly. I've had children look all over my office and youth rooms over the years looking for my bedroom, convinced I lived at church. But it seems like Anna really did! Anna's spirituality and dedication to God are what make her really remarkable. Simeon had been waiting his whole life for this moment! God had promised Simeon that after he had seen the Messiah, his life would end in peace. It seems Simeon was so ecstatic after he sees Jesus and blesses them, that he declares, I can die now! Both Simeon and Anna were very old. They never lost hope, they just kept waiting.

Our current society has such different values than those of Simeon and Anna. They lived in a time where age and wisdom were revered and respected versus now where there are commercials dedicated to younger generations teaching our elders about new technology. There's a holiday commercial I saw recently that depicted an extended family gathering for the holiday. The Grandma and Grandpa encounter each person, offering some life experience to help in the child or younger person's current dilemma. It ends with Grandpa approaching his son or son-in-law asking to help with the turkey, as he had done the cooking many times before—to which the son pulls his airpod out of his ear and says, "Oh no Dad. I've got it. I found a YouTube video that's helping me."

In my mind, I saw my own Father, do to me after a statement like that, the older man in the commercial walks away and patiently waits. Waits for his son or daughter to realize what's just happened. Patiently waiting, as a parent often does while their child figures out how to solve a problem, how to use the resources in other people around them, waiting as a grown up does sometimes, waiting to share all that a personal relationship can give. Waiting as God, our heavenly parent, waits on us to figure things out, to realize all that He can help, He's just a prayerful chat away.

These days it seems that we are living in a giant Skinner Box. In 1930, B.F. Skinner, a behavioral scientist, experimented with animals in a contained environment, the box, wherein if they pressed a lever, they were rewarded with a food pellet. Skinner's theory is that all beings' actions are based on reinforcement. He refers to it as operant conditioning. We've become so conditioned to having things delivered more efficiently and faster that we've become a society that celebrates impatience. The rewards have become so immediate that fast isn't fast enough.

For example, Uber is a wonderful tool, I've Ubered in different towns or to a place where I know that parking will be a nightmare. But I have found myself growing really impatient when the driver isn't there when I beckon. Or we get impatient when our pizza isn't delivered in the ten-minute window. Starbucks strives to keep a 45 second wait time in the drive thru. Forty-Five seconds to make a "Venti Passion Tea, no classic add sugar free vanilla, no water, heavy whip," in a language that quite frankly I don't even really understand! Or how about how long it takes to get on the internet! Does anyone remember dial up—waiting five minutes for it to open or to even change pages?

In Max Lucado's book "*A Gentle Thunder*," he tells of a man who dared God to speak.

"'Burn the bush like you did for Moses, God. And I will follow. Collapse the walls like you did for Joshua, God. And I will fight. Still the waves like you did on Galilee, God. And I will listen.' And so the man sat by a bush, near a wall, close to the sea and waited for God to speak. And God heard the man, so God answered. He sent fire, not for a bush, but for a church. He brought down a wall, not of brick, but of sin. He stilled the storm, not of the sea, but of a soul. And God waited for man to respond. And he waited . . . and waited. But because the man was looking at bushes, not hearts, bricks and not lives, seas and not souls, he decided that God had done nothing. Finally, he looked to God and asked, 'Have You lost Your power?' And God looked at him and said, 'Have you lost your hearing?'"

God waits patiently and we live impatiently and expecting what we want—not necessarily what or how God gives. For example, we've waited for Christmas, waited and waited and waited. This year it seems an incredibly long wait as we also wait for this pandemic to end, but after all that waiting it's over, right? The decorations, the sparkly lights, the beautiful packages opened and put away. But Wait! NO! We're actually still in the Christmas season. It's actually just beginning!

You know the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas"? It's not just a fun song, it was based on the fact that the Christmas season is actually 12 days long starting on December 25th, not ending there! We have ten days yet! Ten days to relish in the season. Instead of moving onto the next thing!

This Advent we've been looking at the lyrics to "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel." It's words today speak of the prayer for Emmanuel to return and make right all that's wrong in our world. Is anyone else thinking: THIS SHOULD HAVE BEEN THAT YEAR?! But we know that 2020 is just one year of many, just a brief blip, in a small prelude in the life to come. It is part of our waiting, maybe to help us learn how to wait?!

In his podcast, Ryan Holiday discusses his ideas from his book "*Stillness is Key*," and in it, he says all of humanity's problems stem from our inability to sit quietly in a room, alone." Like being in a Skinner Box, we really need some form of gratification. But really, waiting is experiencing time with no reward.

These days let's just take a step back for a second. I know I've felt like I'm in the biggest waiting room ever. The hardest part of this waiting and all waiting is that we don't know when it's going to end. But we're not stuck in God's little waiting room. While we wait, we look around, we move forward. Anna and Simeon moved forward to the temple to serve the people there, while waiting. Waiting is part of our ongoing walk with Jesus. We aren't comfortable with waiting, because we feel like it's pointless—or worse, that we're missing out on opportunities as we wait. However, it's in the waiting that God grows us into what he desires for us. God may be using that time to help us strengthen, trust, and learn—and maybe fly.

It reminds me of the movie, "*Soul Surfer*." The movie portrays Bethany Hamilton. At thirteen years old, Bethany was surfing off the island of Hawaii when she was attacked by a tiger shark, leaving her without her left arm. Devastated by the tragedy, Bethany questioned whether to continue surfing. However, she pressed on and figured out how to move forward while waiting on God. About a year after her accident, Bethany signed up with World Vision and boarded a plane, en route to tsunami-

stricken Thailand. She spent a week serving the people of Thailand, perhaps the most memorable involved helping more than fifty children from the village she served at overcome their fear of the ocean by taking them surfing.

God's waiting room might be full, but God's not the one in a hurry. We struggle through the exercise of waiting only to become stronger and wiser in the process. We must remember God's will takes time, and God's time is not our time. But that doesn't mean we just sit still. Waiting, as Christians, is an active form of life. Anna and Simeon were waiting for the Messiah, serving the visitors to the temple all the while waiting for their own reasons. Simeon and Anna were waiting for the Messiah to rescue and comfort the Israelites. The Holy Spirit moved them, prompted them to action in the midst of their waiting.

Is God prompting you to do something in your waiting? Take a look around. What makes your heart beat faster? What wrongs can you right? And consider this, while I'm waiting, what do I need to remember? What do I need to do?

Who are the Simeons and Annas in your life who can help you see God's work in your life and your family? Who can teach you to wait patiently, while still listening and moving forward? And while you find your "doing" amidst your waiting, be patient with those around you. You don't know what's happening for them in their waiting. Be patient, be kind, be love.

Amen.

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