

SIMEON AND ANNA

SERIES: UNTO US

By Danny Hall

We've been looking at the story of Christmas in the book of Luke in this series, and we've seen an interesting pattern in the different ways that the birth of Jesus is announced. God reveals what he is doing to very ordinary people using the most remarkable situations!

In contrast, think about the way important things are announced in our culture. This past week there were a couple of big things in the news. One was the swearing in of the first female Speaker of the House. There was a lot of hoopla around that. The other was the inauguration of Governor Schwarzenegger for his second term here in California, amid a lot of fanfare. There were parties and announcements and speeches. Fabulous amounts of money were spent on celebrating these achievements of important people in high places.

Two thousand years ago a little baby was born. He was God's Messiah, the King of kings and Lord of lords (Revelation 19:16). We have all kinds of ways we describe what happened, but back then it was just the birth of a baby. Announcements were made in spectacular ways, but not to everybody, just to a select few. The unfolding revelation of who this baby was and what this life was going to be was remarkably muted in the human arena, compared to what we see now when high-visibility people enter the stage to do important things.

In this message we'll see that the announcement of who Jesus is and what he is going to do comes out of the mouths of ordinary people in rather limited circumstances, yet proclaims amazing facts. We're going to look at both the characters that are involved in this drama, and also the proclamation by two of the characters of who this baby Jesus is. Luke 2:21-40:

On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought

**in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required,
Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:**

**“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”**

**The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him.
Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child
is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a
sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts
will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”**

**There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the
tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband
seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was
eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day,
fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she
gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking
forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.**

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Let me talk about the setting for a moment. Joseph and Mary are bringing Jesus to the temple in accordance with the prescriptions of the Law. Mary is going through a rite of purification and Jesus is being dedicated. There are three different parts to what they are doing.

First is the rite of purification. When a child was born, the mother was considered to be unclean for a number of days. For male children that was seven days, plus another thirty-three-day waiting period until the mother could return to temple worship (Leviticus 12:1-4). At that time the rite of purification would be done. This rite included an offering of a lamb as a burnt offering and a turtle dove as a sin offering. If they could not afford a lamb (only the wealthy seemed to be able to), then they would bring two pigeons or two turtle doves for these offerings (Leviticus 12:6-8). This tells us Joseph and Mary are not wealthy, but the wealthy were actually a fairly small part of the population. So this just means that Joseph and Mary are part of the common folk in the nation of Israel. They don't have great wealth, but they probably aren't in abject poverty. He has a trade as a carpenter. But since they don't have a lot of extra money, they bring the lesser sacrifice prescribed for them in the Law as an offering.

Also there are two parts of this dedication of the child. All baby boys who were born to the tribe of Levi would automatically be a part of the priestly class. For firstborn baby boys from other tribes, parents were required to bring a small offering in place of the service of the priests. This redemption price was five shekels (Numbers 18:1-16). While Luke does not specifically record their bringing of this offering, it would have been customary to do so.

The third part of this is the dedication of the firstborn to the service of the Lord (Exodus 13:2, 12). This was required of all Jewish families.

In summary, we see that Mary and Joseph are obeying the Law, giving their service to the Lord. They are completely committed to honoring the Lord in this.

Now they run into Simeon and Anna. Since Mary and Anna are women, this encounter would take place either in the court of the women or in the court of the Gentiles. These were the parts of the temple compound to which women had access (probably in accordance with the traditional rules of temple worship). Women were not allowed in the inner parts of the temple court, where the holy of holies was and the formal offerings were made.

To understand this story, let's first take a look at the characters in it. It is instructive for us to think about who these people are and what they exemplify for us.

Ordinary people centered on God

First consider the parents. As I said, Joseph and Mary are just obeying the Law. Now, they have come through an amazing season. Mary was visited by an angel who told her that she would conceive a child by the Holy Spirit, and she carried this miraculous baby for nine months. Joseph, her husband, whose culture gave him the opportunity to walk away from her when she became pregnant, was also visited by an angel. The result was that he stood by her side. Then the two of them embarked on an unexpected journey on which the baby was born. The birth of this baby was proclaimed and witnessed by shepherds who had an encounter with angels. All these fantastic things have happened. Mary and Joseph know this baby is going to have an important place in the history of Israel. But in spite of the special place he will have and the blessing they have been granted, what do we see them doing? They are simply obeying the Law. They are people of humility and pious devotion to God. Their heart's desire is to please God. They take no personal pride in the fact that they have been chosen. They show no ambition. They just go through the rituals required of them as parents of this new baby, and dedicate him to the Lord. They remind us that humility and faith and devotion to God are key components of what it means to be a believer in God.

As Joseph and Mary go into the temple, they meet Simeon. Simeon's age is not given to us, but he seems to have been waiting for a long time for what happens on this day, and he is ready to die now. We can assume that he is an older man. Some legends and

speculations have it that he is very old, perhaps more than one hundred years of age. We have no way of knowing. Some artwork and later stories depict him as a priest, but Luke does not say that. He's probably just an ordinary man, but he has a great heart for the Lord. He wants to know and connect with God. He's seen quite a long portion of the history of Israel played out in his day. He would have been a witness to both good and bad among his own people. His heart's longing is to see God move. He is described as righteous and devout, someone who is intent on seeking God constantly. We would call him a prayer warrior. And he is described as being Spirit-led. In fact, because of his trust in the leading of the Holy Spirit, he has been granted this promise that he will see the Messiah before he dies.

I started thinking about that. What is it that we long to do or see before we die? Perhaps you have come across these contemporary lists of fifty things of various kinds to do before you die: fifty sporting challenges, fifty foods to try, fifty places to see, and so on. These lists are someone's idea of things you ought to do to have a full life. I've often wondered what it is that I really want to do or see before I die. One of the authors I enjoy reading from time to time is Bill Simmons, who writes a column on espn.com. He's from Boston, and he wrote a book a couple of years after the Boston Red Sox finally won the World Series in 2004. The title of his book was *Now I Can Die in Peace* (1). There were lots of fans who said they just wanted to see the Boston Red Sox win the World Series before they died. There were stories of people who had been fans for eighty years without ever seeing the Red Sox win the World Series. After they finally won, these fans were saying, "Now I can die in peace."

We have all kinds of silly notions about what we'd like to see before we die. But what is important to Simeon? "I just want to see the Messiah before I die. I have longed all my life for the decisive work of God on behalf of his people and on behalf of the world. And God has promised me that it will happen before I die!" This wonderful Spirit-led man believes God's promise.

He is a man who sees that God is the answer to Israel's problems. In the nation at that time there were all kinds of movements to preserve a place for the leadership, to overthrow Rome. There was a man named Simon the Zealot who became one of Jesus' disciples, after being part of a faction that was trying to militarily overthrow the rule of Rome. There were all kinds of ideas about what was needed to get Israel back to the place it had once occupied. Simeon's heart is that only God can do that. The answer to Israel's problem is not found in political movements or any other human efforts. Luke says that Simeon is waiting for the consolation of Israel, which is a reference to the promise that one day God will deliver his people, restore them, fulfill his purposes and promises. That is what Simeon's heart longs for. He shows amazing understanding and insight into what the Messiah will be and do. We'll come back to that in a moment.

The last character in the story is a prophetess named Anna. Luke tells us she is very old, and that she was married for only seven years before being widowed. She has been a widow ever since. The way the original language is constructed, it could mean that she was actually a widow for eighty-four years. If that were the case, she would be over a

hundred years old. Regardless of her age, what has she done with her life? She has spent her time worshiping, fasting, and praying.

The interesting similarity between Anna and Simeon is that they have filled their lives up with God. That's what they are about. We all have gaps in our lives, and we try to fill them with any number of things. But the beautiful thing about Simeon and Anna is that God is enough for them.

Now as we look more deeply into the story, Simeon and Anna each have a response when they encounter this couple and their baby. Simeon's is given to us in great detail, Anna's more concisely. Let's look at the two responses as Luke continues to unfold his description of who this baby Jesus is.

Messiah revealed

Simeon's words are a six-line poem, if you will, consisting of three couplets, or pairs of lines, which he offers as a song of praise as he takes the baby Jesus in his arms. Verses 29-32:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation,

which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

He has waited all his life for God to act. Now as he holds this baby in his arms, he testifies that the sovereign Lord of the universe, Jehovah God, the covenant God of Israel, has finally fulfilled what he said he was going to do. The Messiah has come! Interestingly enough, when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus in, Simeon immediately recognizes him for who he is, again, I think, because of his sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit. God has promised him this, and now the Holy Spirit reveals to him that this baby is the One. He holds him in his arms, the fulfillment of all his dreams and hopes and prayers and waiting. And he offers this praise: “Sovereign Lord, you’ve done it! You’ve kept your promise! Now you can dismiss me in peace.” In other words, he’s saying, “I am ready to go. My life is full now. You’ve acted decisively for me and for our nation, and everything I’ve hoped for and wanted to see accomplished in this life is here.”

He says, “I’ve seen your salvation which you prepared in the sight of all the people.” Here Simeon opens up a new, amazing truth. Remember, he is a pious Jew, immersed in the history of his people and in the predictions of what the Messiah will do when he comes. So many in the nation saw the Messiah only as one who would throw off the yoke of Roman oppression and re-establish Israel as a great nation. But Simeon sees that this Messiah is being revealed to all people. He clarifies that in verse 32, calling the Messiah a light. He will dispel darkness and confusion and reveal the truth. Simeon says this light

will be a revelation to the Gentiles and glory to God's people Israel. The Gentiles, all the peoples of the world, are not excluded from God's promises and his work. The Jewish Messiah is not just a Savior for the Jewish people, but for all people. He reveals that God's love extends to every human being on the face of the earth. But he is also a glory to Israel, for what the nation of Israel was called to do, to take the light to the ends of the earth, is now being fulfilled in him.

This parallels Isaiah's prophecies of the victorious Servant, the One who will accomplish what God has called Israel to do (Isaiah 42, 49). Simeon proclaims that God is now decisively acting and fulfilling these promises. He has taken the scope of the mission of the Messiah and clearly is expanding it to the ends of the earth. This salvation is not to be hoarded by one group of people, as privileged as they are to be conduits of God's blessing to the world.

Now it says that Mary and Joseph react by marveling at what Simeon has said. Why are they so astonished, after all they have come through—the virgin birth, angelic visits, shepherds coming with messages from angels? Perhaps his articulation of this expansion of the mission of the Messiah to the Gentiles, to all the nations, opens their eyes even more to the miraculous nature of this child.

In response to that, Simeon gives a special blessing to them and then offers them a jolt, if you will. He turns to Mary in verse 34 and says three things. First he predicts that as

glorious and wonderful as the fulfillment of God's purpose is, this Son of hers will be a divisive figure. He will be the cause of the rising and falling of many in the nation.

In predicting that Jesus will be a controversial, divisive figure in their land, he says his will be a probing, exposing life. People will have to make a decision about him, and as they do so they will reveal their hearts. Some will oppose Jesus. There will be leaders in the Jewish nation who will oppose him vehemently, because he challenges the system that has brought them power and privilege. They do not want a Messiah like Jesus, because it will cost them. So their hearts will be revealed, that they're not really devoted to God and to his causes, but to their own place. Some, like Mary and Joseph, Anna and Simeon in this story, and others, will come with open hearts to what God is doing, and their hearts will be revealed as they seek to follow him. Simeon is saying that Jesus will not be someone people can remain neutral about. He will force them to make a decision.

Finally he says a personal word to Mary: "His life is also going to be painful for you." There are different Greek words for sword, and the one used here is the word for the larger, wider, two-edged sword, the most deadly weapon in the arsenal. Simeon says, "This Son of yours will pierce that sword right through your heart." The life that Jesus will live, the choices that he will make to carry out his mission in obedience to his Father, will bring incredible heartache to his mother. Obviously this foreshadows that moment when she will watch him die. This will begin to be fulfilled even in the story that we'll look at in the next message, when Jesus is just twelve years old. All the way through his

life he makes choices that will cause her great pain, because his life will be a life of suffering and opposition.

Now Anna walks onto the scene. Anna's words are not given to us. Anna responds to this baby in two ways. First she begins to worship and thank God for the fulfillment of all that he has promised. Then she turns to anyone who will hear and proclaims this fulfillment to all who are looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem, which is parallel to the consolation of Israel in Simeon's song of praise. These people could hardly wait for God to act, and now they are seeing it with their own eyes! Their response is to praise God and to proclaim to anyone with ears to hear and eyes to see, "This is it! God has brought redemption to Jerusalem, to fulfill his promises and purposes!"

What will we do about Jesus?

What do we make of these stories? In conclusion I want us to think about four things. First of all, God uses ordinary people of faith as conduits of his blessing, his word, and his work—Mary and Joseph, a carpenter and his young bride; Simeon, an old man; Anna, an older woman. I have a feeling there are people all across the courtyard of the temple who think Anna is a bit daft, hanging around the temple mumbling praises under her breath. But she is just a humble soul, an ordinary person, and yet because of her faith and her desire to hear God's voice, God allows her, as he does other ordinary people of faith, to be a conduit of his blessing, his word, and his work. That's a source of hope for you

and me. Throughout Luke's telling of the story it is the common people who have first place. We get to be part of what God is doing.

Second, the elements of their faithfulness are quite simple: prayer, faith, and obedience. This is also a reason for hope. It's really not rocket science. We don't have to master great theological concepts. The life of someone God uses is characterized by prayer—communion with God, seeking after God—by believing him, and by doing what he asks. The angel asked Mary to conceive this child by the Holy Spirit and endure the public shame of being a pregnant, unwed teenager in her culture with a secret that no one is going to believe. But she says, "Whatever you say, Lord, I'll do." Joseph's fiancée turns up pregnant, and no one is going to believe this explanation of the Holy Spirit; they'll just think she's been cheating on him. He could save face, divorce her and get on with his life; that is his right. But Joseph, also visited by a messenger of God, learns what God is doing, and he too is obedient. He endures the shame of walking beside that girl, and who knows what wagging tongues are saying. Whenever God asks these people to do something, they just obey him. Even Simeon and Anna, in their responses, just do what God wants them to do in the moment; these are simple acts of obedience and faith.

What marvelous examples to us! I fear that many times God impresses on us that he wants us to do something, or we see from his word things he wants us to do, and the first thing we think of is all the reasons why we can't or all the questions we want God to answer before we are willing. The testimony of these people is that they trust that when

God asks them to do something, it matters and it is the right thing to do, and they just obey.

Finally, there are two things about Jesus that this whole story is centered on. First, Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promises and purposes. At the end of the day it is about him. God will act decisively with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and we await the coming of Jesus again when all things from beginning to end will be summed up in him.

Because that is true, finally, the fourth thing for us to think about is that Jesus forces us to decide. It is in Jesus that God is working out his purposes and his promises. It is through Jesus that he is rescuing the world from what destroys us, our own sinfulness. It is Jesus who will be exalted as the King of kings and Lord of lords. Therefore we must decide about him. We don't have the luxury of saying, "I don't know and I don't care."

So the call to you and me is to look at the baby Jesus in this story, and with an expanded understanding of who he is, decide what we are going to do with Jesus. If you have never come to the point of concluding that Jesus is the one that you have to believe in, because it is in him that God's forgiveness is found, then that's the decision that Jesus puts before you. For the rest of us who have named Jesus as the one we believe in, perhaps for many years, each and every day when we make decisions about what God wants to do in our lives, we are forced once again to decide: will we trust and obey Jesus? Or will we ignore him, or deny him?

Think about the person of Jesus in whom God's purposes and promises are being fulfilled. Through him and him alone God has acted decisively to rescue us from our sins and offer us his wonderful forgiveness. He calls us to be his followers, to honor him and to proclaim his glory. What will you do with Jesus today?

Notes

1. Bill Simmons, *Now I Can Die in Peace*, © 2006, ESPN Books, New York City, NY.

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Luke 2:1-21-40

Fifth Message

Danny Hall

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[Back to Index page](#)

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