



EYES WIDE OPEN

January 13, 2019, Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Luke 2:22-40

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O LORD, Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

You're probably wondering why today, Baptism of the Lord Sunday, Gracey didn't read the story of Jesus' baptism just now. You remember, the story of the miraculous event when John the Baptist lowers Jesus into the river, and the sky opens, and the Spirit descends?? Today in the liturgical calendar is the day when we remember this event; we remember God's voice from heaven telling us that "yes" this is God's son we see being lowered into the river.

Well, not to confuse you, but I changed the reading for today. Although I love the story of Jesus' baptism, Luke's account of John the Baptist and his preaching are unsettling. Remember John yelling "You brood of vipers"? Remember his words of judgment before Jesus even approaches the river? It's a difficult text; even the lectionary from Luke 3 today edits out John's words. Therefore, I went in another direction. However, if you want to hear an excellent sermon on John the Baptist's preaching and Jesus' baptism in Luke, Kim wrestled beautifully with that message in December. So I thought I had permission to go elsewhere today.

Besides today is a baptism Sunday at Brick Church, a Sunday when we celebrate families and meet new children in our midst. Today is not a day of vipers but a day of babies. So this morning, I thought we'd go back and pick up the story in Luke 2 when Jesus was still a baby himself. In this story, we see Jesus' young family travel to the Temple to present him to their God. And it parallels much of what we



did today, this baptism Sunday—how we welcome children into our family of faith and pray God’s blessing upon them. This is actually what Mary and Joseph are doing themselves; it’s a mark of their religious life together. They are a young Jewish family following religious tradition by bringing their son to the Temple. “In case there was any doubt about Mary and Joseph’s religious credentials, here Luke presents them as devout and faithful.”¹

Moreover, their mood as a young family couldn’t be that much different from baptism families at Brick Church, feelings of excitement and reverence, hope filled with a nervous expectancy. You hope your child doesn’t scream the whole time, and you pray that something wonderfully mysterious happens. In this story, “It’s not hard to imagine the quiet procession [Mary and Joseph] must have made to the great Temple, their awe at entering its holy courts, their nervousness as they prepared”² to follow the law.

So the excitement is palpable. Mary and Joseph move forward with their newborn to make their humble sacrifice, but it’s at this point that the story moves from calm reverence to chaotic excitement. All of a sudden, Mary and Joseph get waylaid. From the shadows comes this old man named Simeon, a devout man, but also a perfect stranger. He walks up to Mary and Joseph and takes their child into his arms. Before they can get their wits about them, this old man is teetering around the courtyard carrying their newborn, praising his God, and saying that *now* he can die in peace. And just as Mary and Joseph are starting to wrap their brains around his words, another stranger approaches. An old woman, Anna, comes toward them and begins to prophecy. She starts to tell anyone who’ll stand still long enough to listen, about this baby and about how he’s going to save them all and redeem the people of God. She too breaks out in praise!³

¹ <http://thq.wearesparkhouse.org/featured/christmas1gospel-2/>

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1510>

³ Much of the material and ideas in this paragraph are from a sermon on Simeon and Anna preached by the Rev. Dr. William Joseph Hutto.



The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple is sometimes referred to as the story of Simeon and Anna, because they steal the show and speak words of great excitement. Luke introduces us to two fantastic new individuals in the text, faithful Jewish people who've been desperately waiting for the Messiah. Simeon, waiting for the redemption of Israel, has been covered by the Holy Spirit day and night, just waiting for the Messiah's arrival. And Anna, a prophet and widow, has been camping out at the Temple day and night, fasting and praying for God's Messiah to come. Their excitement is palpable, and Simeon and Anna must have overwhelmed Mary and Joseph.

These two faithful individuals have been waiting, watching, listening and looking for God to arrive. The reason they're able to offer up these words of hope and promise to these young parents is that they've kept their eyes wide open for God's movement. In the midst of Roman occupation, their eyes remain wide open to Hope.

I have to admit, I'm not a fan of scary movies. It doesn't matter if they're called psychological thrillers, horror or sci-fi fantasy. I don't watch them. But I can't help but see the buzz over Sandra Bullock's new Netflix drama *Bird Box*. If you haven't seen it, I'm sure you've seen the images of her in a blindfold, along with her kids; maybe you've even seen the image of them canoeing down a river each one blinded from the world around them.

Don't worry, I won't spoil the whole movie...like I said I won't watch it. But it's fair to say that the majority of the cast are afraid of what lies in their field of vision. When their eyes are uncovered, people see evil, they watch violence, and they lose hope. The sight of these evils horrifies them, and they're blinded to any other reality. So, in order to survive...they cover their eyes out of fear. Their solution is to run away and hide. In order to stay safe, they blind themselves out of fear.

I mention this popular movie because it's the exact opposite of what Simeon and Anna are doing in the Temple. They have been keeping their eyes open, but it's not because they have nothing to fear. Simeon and Anna have MORE than enough reason to be afraid. Simeon and Anna are not young; they've seen the damage and



repercussions of multiple occupations. Anna would have seen the bloodshed as her people fought to prevent the military standards of Rome from being placed inside the Temple walls.⁴ Simeon, while guided by the Holy Spirit, would have witnessed a number of false prophets leading others astray, claiming to be the Messiah. Simeon and Anna know that this Temple in which they wait has been built, destroyed, built, and destroyed again. From what they've seen, the story of their people has always been filled with danger.

Regardless...Simeon and Anna keep their eyes open. Regardless of the Roman Empire, regardless of the danger they've seen in Jerusalem, in the Temple, and in their streets, they keep their eyes open. In fact, their eyes are WIDE OPEN because they know that God is at work. They know God has never stopped working. Simeon and Anna keep their eyes wide open for the promised revelation of the God they know. And, on this day... God does just that. God makes Godself known in the baby Jesus. The eyes of Simeon and Anna are open, and they can see what hardly anyone else around them can see. God is here. God's work of redemption has begun. And Simeon and Anna know it. Consequently, they open wide the eyes of those around them.

Think for a minute what everyone else must have seen that day.

Joseph's eyes are opened. Not that he could comprehend all that was just spoken by these two individuals, but Simeon only furthered what the angel Gabriel told Joseph in the beginning. Joseph is the father of a Savior. And not one just for his people, but for Jew and Gentile alike. This baby they are raising is bringing hope to everyone, and Joseph is beginning to see just what that would look like.

The rest of the Jewish worshippers' eyes are opened. Here Simeon and Anna reveal to them, that in the midst of the Roman occupation, God is doing something new for them, something they've been waiting for. God is here, bringing redemption.

⁴ <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5630/sermon-options-december-31-2017>.



If the Gentiles barred from coming into the Temple are paying attention, they would have seen it too. Their eyes would have been open to salvation from the Roman Empire that dictated their lives as well. As Anna and Simeon sing, even the other nations of the world are included in this new vision.

But the one their words hits hardest is Mary. Her eyes had to be strained from all that she's seen in the last year, but even still Simeon and Anna bring her brand new information as they hold her baby. Simeon took the child from her arms...just as Mary would forever be handing her child over to the hopes of others.⁵ And in Simeon's words, this redemption will pierce her heart—salvation will come in a way that's not all good news. Mary's eyes are opened, indeed, but she might be seeing more than she bargained for. She's realizing the babe in her arms will bring salvation in a way that those in power will oppose.

In fact, all of our eyes have been opened thanks to Simeon and Anna. That, for me, is how this story connects to the Baptism of the Lord Sunday. When we baptize, when we take water and place it on someone's head, we remember that Jesus is the Messiah. Our eyes become open to the fact that Jesus, and no other ruler, no other power, is the one to bring hope and redemption. Simeon and Anna reveal that God has sent Jesus to deliver us.

And it is for that reason that we can keep our eyes open to the goodness of God. Brothers and sisters, we don't get to choose what good times we see, what bad times we see. But we do get to choose whether or not our eyes remain open to the promise and power of God regardless of what life brings.

When the news headlines depress us, we can keep our eyes open.

When a friend receives a difficult diagnosis, we can keep our eyes open.

When the voice inside our head, or a harsh critique outside, says that we are not enough, we can keep our eyes open.

⁵ <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9422/weekly-preaching-december-30-2018>



When paychecks don't come and people remain out of work, we can keep our eyes open.

When we see parents and children fleeing violence at home, we can keep our eyes open.

When those in power incite fear, we can keep our eyes open.

Today, my friends, the water is poured out, and it will run down our foreheads. Because of this grace, we can't close our eyes. Simeon and Anna reveal to us today that we don't need to hide in fear. We don't need to drown in despair, wallow in sarcasm or take on a despondent outlook.

Friends, let the waters of baptism open our sight today to our God who can redeem any situation. God is here, God is active. And today God is calling us to open our eyes wide so we can see it.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.