

Faith Mennonite Church
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What are we waiting for?
Luke 2:22-38

Imagine a celestial courtroom. The plaintiffs are Simeon and Anna. They've been watching earthling Christmas pageants (from afar) for a couple thousand years and they have yet to be included in the cast. What's going on?" they ask the judge. "Why do the magi and the shepherds—and even the animals—always get the lead roles? We're not even tucked in a corner; we think this is ageism," Simeon says. Anna continues: "We held and blessed that baby when he was just 8 days old; we don't think the magi had even made it to Palestine yet. We want an answer: what's going on? Don't people have respect for the elders who wait and hold on to the dreams?"

The judge announces a recess. She would like some time to review the case and think a bit. Simeon and Anna agree, of course, for waiting is one of their virtues. While the judge is in recess, let's just clarify one thing: we talk about Simeon and Anna as if they are a married couple. But the way Luke tells their story, they just happen to show up at the temple at the same time because it's a place that they both frequented. In fact, Luke says that Anna never left the temple, praying there night and day. I'm not sure how that worked but it reminds me of another woman who lived in a church: Julian of Norwich. She lived about 1300 years later, in England, in a little room that was attached to a church. She was a lot like Anna. She was also waiting—for the end of a war, for the end of a plague—but she never lost hope and she prayed through it all and she offered consolation to people: "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Oh—the judge is returning. I wonder how she'll rule.

"Will the plaintiffs Anna and Simeon please rise. Simeon and Anna, you have brought a legitimate complaint. I have read the birth accounts of Jesus written by Matthew and by Luke. Matthew used 12 verses to recount the story of the magi. Luke, who tells your story and the story of the shepherds, dedicated 13 verses to the shepherd's story, but 14 verses to your encounter with the baby Jesus. So just by sheer verse-count, you have a valid complaint. What is it with the way that people have been telling this story? I'm guessing that's it's more than just a mathematical problem.

"It's probably a bit more complex. You have to admit that it's hard to beat the exotic element of the magi, those mysterious guys who came from the east, following a star, and bearing really awesome gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh (well, they were awesome before there were Apple products). And the shepherds.... to be honest, shepherds don't have a lot of appeal. They can be pretty smelly and they don't cut their hair very often. But who doesn't love a fluffy lamb? And remember they had the angelic sky show that no fireworks display will ever match. And what's not to like about "peace on earth," the message they received.

“Maybe people have trouble with your story because it contains all the ordinary and the hard parts of life: the waiting, the getting old, the facing of death, and also the fact that this baby Jesus was going to be a different kind of Messiah, the long-awaited holy leader that would liberate God’s people. You were given to see that this leader would speak truth in a way that would cause conflict. You were given to see and you didn’t hide it from his mother, that this tender, promising life would end in pain, bringing deep pain to her. That’s kind of a downer.

“Simeon and Anna, it’s easier for people to imagine that God would have so much love for the people she created that she would become one of them, be born and become a person. It’s much harder to believe that same God would allow himself to die, to be killed by the very people he came to show love. It’s hard to talk about conflict. It’s hard to talk about death. And it’s really hard to wait.

“But your story is more important than ever this year in 2016, now 2017! People of the earth, especially people in that country called the United States of America, need to hear how it was that you were able to recognize the Messiah. It wasn’t because you went to big rallies and shouted and got raving mad at the Romans. No, it was because you prayed and you listened to the Holy Spirit speaking through the words of the prophets who had come before you. You knew that God’s Messiah would come from people who were devoted to God’s ways as you were. You knew you’d find him in the temple. It didn’t surprise you that the Messiah’s parents were just ordinary folk, bringing the most humble of sacrifices to dedicate their child. They weren’t into bling or greatness, they just wanted to raise that boy to know and love God, God’s word, and the joys of physical labor. You knew they would be open to hearing the truth and accepting the truth even if it meant a sacrifice on their part and on the part of their child.

“Simeon and Anna, you have not brought a frivolous complaint. The court finds your observation accurate and uncontested. You did not ask for a settlement so I will not grant an award, but I would ask a favor: please continue to gather all your heavenly friends and remind the heavenly hosts to keep praying for the people of the earth that they might yet come to understand the full story of Christmas...the story of the angels and the magi and the shepherds... and of wise, Spirit-filled Simeon and Anna who waited and prayed for the consolation and redemption of God’s people. This court is adjourned.”