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 First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia  
 First Sunday of Christmas, December 27, 2021  
 Text: Luke 2:25-38

## Simeon and Anna

I love Luke. More than any other gospel, Luke includes women in his stories, quite often pairing them with another male or female character. In just the first few chapters we read of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, and today, Anna and Simeon.

The setting is the Temple in Jerusalem. The temple is a key location as it represents the heart of Judaism and, for Luke, the continuity of the church with Israel. Mary and Joseph have brought their baby to be presented to the Lord, as prescribed by the Jewish law. They are obedient Jews who intend to raise their child in the faith. Luke is making it abundantly clear that Jesus is not some upstart from nowhere but fits into the picture God has been painting for generations. A key actor in Luke's two volumes is the Holy Spirit, who has choreographed the encounter of the young couple and their child with the two elderly saints, Simeon and Anna, who are our focus this morning.

Simeon was a righteous and devout man, presumably nearing the end of his life. In a poem, T. S. Eliot puts these words in his mouth:

I have walked many years in this city,  
 Kept faith and fast, provided for the poor,  
 Have given and taken honour and ease.

There went never any rejected from my door.

Simeon has lived obediently with his eye trained on God, ever looking for the consolation of Israel, i.e. its restoration as envisioned by prophets like Isaiah. I imagine the white-haired, bearded Simeon spying the six-week-old baby at the temple and somehow recognizing God's fingerprints all over the swaddled infant. He approaches the modest family, reaches out, and gingerly takes the child in his fragile arms. Bending down to smell his baby scent and planting a kiss on his forehead, he then looks up and utters a prayer of thanks. For in Jesus Simeon recognizes the means of salvation for *all* people, Jew and Gentile. However, this restoration, this consolation, this salvation won't be without great cost. Jesus will bring truth to light and will, and in doing so, cause conflict. Simeon blesses the new parents but warns Mary that there will be a steep price for both her and her child.

Simeon reminds me of Stan. Stan was retired from the Air Force. He came at 7 am on Sunday mornings to unlock the church, plug in the coffee pot, read the scripture lessons printed in the bulletin, and welcome every person who walked through the door. He never met a stranger. He paid attention, so he knew every member and child by name and could tell me who the visitors were, where they were from, and what car they drove.

Anna, like Simeon, is advanced in years and a person of great devotion and righteousness, veritably living on the temple grounds as she nurtured a life of prayer and fasting. She is from a pedigreed family and is a prophet, i. e. a spokesperson for God. At the Temple, she, too, recognizes the identity and significance of the child Jesus. She praises God and speaks about the child to every person who ever harbored a ray of hope about God fulfilling his promises.

Anna reminds me of a church matriarch named Adelaide. She was a tiny widow, hunched

over with osteoporosis and arthritis, who dwelt alone in a grand house in our small South Carolina town. While petite in stature, Adelaide's faith was giant. She was there every time the church doors opened. She was a woman of prayer and Bible reading, and, unlike the biblical Anna who fasted, a believer in ministry by casserole and pound cake. I remember how when the youth group caroled at her house, she invited us in, served us homemade cookies which were waiting for us, and made it a special point to welcome and engage in conversation the black boy who was part of the group.

Of Anna and Simeon, the New Testament scholar Fred Craddock says, "These two aged saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the Temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises."<sup>i</sup>

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I think they also provide wonderful models for us, and especially for those of us who are, dare I say, getting older. So, you can think of this as a "Senior Adult Sunday" sermon, if you want. As I was discussing the matter with my spiritual director (who is older than I), she cringed when I said I wanted to say something that might be helpful to our aging members.

"Don't ever say, 'aging,' she cautioned. "Just say, 'those who have had more birthdays.'"

So, with Anna and Simeon as our patron saints, let's consider how we want our lives, i.e. our spiritual lives, to grow and develop as we accumulate birthdays. And we'll do so from two angles: the *personal* and the *social*.

So first, let's consider our spiritual life as we grow older from the angle of *personal* transformation. During our younger years, we are consumed with the business of making a living and caring for family. We are in action and production mode. So, there may not have been much time and energy for reflection. But as we slow down and enter retirement, there's more time to pause and contemplate. In the US now, men who are currently 65 can expect to live another 18 years and women, another 20 years. Aging seems to provide us a kind of "natural monastery" in which earlier roles, attachments, and pleasures are naturally stripped away from us.<sup>ii</sup> What can emerge is a wonderful sense of discovering that life is more than doing. We can learn to cultivate quietness and inwardness. We can become more at home with just being. Following the examples of Simeon and Anna, prayer and meditation can become more important sources of vitality for us, as we deepen our relationship with God and become more in tune with the Holy Spirit.

The longer we live, the closer we get to our own death. If we are willing to look death in the eye and come to terms with our mortality, we can develop a heightened appreciation of life. Knowing that our days are getting scarcer can make us value them more. We can take more pleasure in the little things. Sunshine dappling through the trees, a grandchild's expression of awe or delight, a good night's sleep, or just a morning cup of coffee become sacred moments. When we can let go of fearing death, we have energy freed up for other things. Our lives can be lighter and more creative. We may even laugh with the wag who said, "Death is absolutely safe. Nobody ever fails it."

Our latter years afford us the opportunity to examine our lives more closely. Gerontologists tell us that one of the major tasks of old age is to reflect upon the wealth of our past experience—our successes as well as our failures and unresolved conflicts. There are tools we can employ to do this: journaling, writing our memoir (not necessarily for publication, maybe just for ourselves or for our family), or the spiritual practice of *Examen*. The spiritual practice of *Examen* was developed by Ignatius of Loyola in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is an exercise of prayer and

contemplation which involves a series of steps as you review your day, your year, or perhaps your lifetime.

A big part of our self-examination will involve the healing of relationships. That, of course, takes the F-word: Forgiveness. Refusing to forgive someone who has wronged you is like sentencing them to prison. However, nursing your anger and resentment puts you in prison with them. Grudges keep you from being free. Not only do you need to forgive others as you grow older, but also yourself. Until you ask yourself what role you may have unconsciously played in creating the dysfunctional relationship, you cannot begin to forgive yourself.

Personal reflection also leads us to ask the big questions of life. What does it all mean? What is most important? What comes after death? We can mine our own Christian tradition for answers. We can have deep conversations with friends and family. We can read widely. We can pray passionately. Hopefully, like our model Simeon, we can come to some resolution and be able to depart this life, when the time comes, in peace. “Master, let your servant depart in peace.”

So, these are just some of ways as we age that we undergo *personal* transformation, the kind of transformation that Simeon and Anna surely experienced as persons of faith. But what about aging from the vantage point of *social* transformation? What about aging and the role we play as part of society, as people called to make our church, our community, our world a better place?

It begins with paying attention. Both Anna and Simeon paid attention. They were on the lookout for what God was doing to bring about social transformation. They were able to recognize in the infant Jesus that God was up to something big. As people who have lived long, older folks have the experience of a lifetime of watching God at work. The alert ones don’t resist it but get on board with it. They are hopeful and positive. They are not stuck in the past but socially aware and forward-looking. The best is yet to be.

At the church where I interned, we had a dance choir. Young girls in leotards and flowing skirts and scarves pirouetted up and down the aisles to the organ music. On a congregational survey, an elderly member of the flock (judging by the handwriting) wrote. “I don’t like the dance choir, but the young people love it. So, dance on!”

At another church I served, it was a widow who could have rested on her laurels, but instead championed the congregation’s undertaking a ministry with a homeless shelter. Every month she rounded up volunteers to drive downtown to cook the men supper... for years.

With age can come a broader perspective. We can grow more compassionate, more understanding, more inclusive. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the vision of God’s salvation that includes not just Jews, but all people, came to the *elderly* Simeon and, before him, to the *mature* Isaiah. “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.”<sup>iii</sup> We certainly need, more than ever, people who understand that God’s love includes every human being.

With increased age we can give ourselves permission to be honest. We don’t have to worry about what other people think. Like the poet we can wear purple and a red hat that doesn’t suit. And we can speak our minds about social ills that we may have been too civil or timid to voice earlier. Thanks to our personal transformation, we can afford to work for social transformation since we don’t care so much about losing our job or reputation. We can be risk-takers who can heal and humanize society. “Older people,” says one such risk-taker, “are not just card-carrying members of Leisure World and midafternoon nap-takers. We are tribal elders,

with an ongoing responsibility for safeguarding the tribe's survival and protecting the health of the planet."<sup>iv</sup> In our later years we can serve society as mobilizers, mentors, mediators, and motivators.

As Simeon blessed and then spoke hard but honest words to Mary about the conflict Jesus would cause and as Prophet Anna button-holed anyone who would hear her out, we have the privilege and duty of joining God's activity of social transformation.

So, to all of us, and especially those who have had a lot of birthdays and hope to have many more, don't wind up a curmudgeon like Ebenezer Scrooge. Instead, take a page out of Simeon and Anna's book. Open yourselves to the *personal* transformation that age can bring and be willing to be part of the *social* transformation that God is enacting.

And thanks for hanging out at the temple on the Sunday after Christmas, praying and singing and celebrating God's incarnation. That alone tells me you are well on your way to aging well.

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<sup>i</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 40.

<sup>ii</sup> Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Ronald S. Miller, *From Age-ing to Sage-ing: A Profound New Vision of Growing Older*, (New York: Warner Books, 1995), p. 26.

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 2:32; cf. Isaiah 42:6, 49:6, 52:10, 60:3.

<sup>iv</sup> Schachter-Shalomi and Miller, p. 73.