

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost • August 17, 2008

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Luke 2:21-40

“Portraits of Faith – Simeon and Anna: Delayed Gratification”

Some of you might have a pair of shoes that are an awful lot like mine: well-worn, well-loved sneakers that have seen better days – and probably need to be retired after many moons of dutifully keeping the soles of your feet intact. My cross-trainers here are about six years old, but I think that they've held up pretty well over the years. A couple of weeks ago, though, I came across an article from *New York Magazine* that compared the advantages of going barefoot (or close to it) versus wearing the air/gel/spring cushioned shoes that dominate the marketplace. It turns out that walking on the feet that God gave us, without a bunch of extra padding, is actually good for the body! The article went on to recommend several styles of nontraditional shoes that seek to balance the benefits of walking barefoot with the protection that comes from having something between the soles of your feet and the things you're stepping on. Excited and convinced that I, too, needed to start walking barefoot (or close to it) *right now(!)*, I hit the Web to get myself a replacement for my old shoes – only to find that the manufacturer had completely sold out in the United States. (It seems a few other people shared my reaction to the article.) My only options were to A) forget about the shoes, or b) wait. That being the case, I now expectantly look forward to the day that I will get to experience the satisfaction of being able to walk barefoot (or close to it) while still being able to get service at the local Taco Bell.

Think about it: how many times in a week do you feel like you need to have something *right now*? How many times in a day? Is that even something that we think about? If we're honest about this, we'd have to admit that most of the time we're not even paying attention. What happens at the restaurant when the waitress brings the dessert tray over to the table? Or walking through the store, seeing the sign that proclaims “50% Off!” Or surfing the Web when home alone? When our eyes wander, it doesn't take very long before we see something that we need *right now*.

The object of our attention could be an experience, like going out with friends (when there's work that we need to get done). It could be a culinary craving, like a bacon double cheeseburger (when we need to restrict what we eat). It might be a new purchase, like a new toy or even a pair of shoes (when we should be saving our pennies). But is the world really out to get you? Do we really live in a culture of immediate gratification, where there are countless options for a better life *right now*? While running an errand this past week, I picked up a couple of advertising circulars from one of the “big box” stores. Right on the front of the flyer, directly underneath the store's logo, is their new, trademarked slogan: “You, Happier.”

Our eyes are always on the lookout for something that will immediately satisfy our needs. That's not surprising, because it's human nature: “What can I get to improve my comfort and happiness *right now*?” This is part of life, whether you're seventy-seven, seventeen, or just seven years old – a reflection of our state under sin – that we turn our eyes away from the future, away from consequences, away from what would be good for us in the long term in the interest of the *right now*. You've felt this firsthand if you've ever been a kid in a toy store with a pocketful of birthday money, if you've seen someone engaging in an activity or bad habit that you'd given up, if you've considered buying one of those items that they put in the checkout aisles at the supermarket. How can anyone wait for a really good thing when there are some many seeming substitutes that we see around us *right now*?

In our reading from Luke today, we learn that Simeon had been given a gift by God: the Holy Spirit was upon him, and he could *see*. Simeon was on the lookout for God's anointed one, the

Christ, the one who would bring consolation and solace to God's people Israel. God made it known to Simeon that he would not die until after he had been witness to the salvation that was coming into the world. And when the Holy Spirit led Simeon to the temple on the same day and time that Joseph and Mary had come to offer their sacrifice of purification after Jesus' birth, Simeon recognized that this little child, not yet six weeks old, was the Messiah. Taking the infant Jesus in his arms, he spoke a message of joy and thanksgiving that has found a place in the liturgy of the Church as the *Nunc Dimittus*, which takes its name from the Latin translation of Simeon's opening words. Simeon's Spirit-prompted proclamation pointed to Jesus as the God-sent deliverer. This child was the One for whom Simeon had been waiting, for whom his eyes had sought so long. After Simeon blessed the family, he gave Mary a glimpse of who Jesus was and what he would do. Speaking of Jesus' divinely-given destiny in verse 35, Simeon's message is often translated into English to say that the boy is appointed for the "fall and rising" of many in Israel. An alternate translation of the Greek here would be the "fall and resurrection" – an apt statement concerning the One who would bring life and immortality to light for the people of Israel and all the world!

Simeon alone would have given us an excellent example of delayed gratification – faithfully waiting on God's timing – but along comes Anna to reinforce the message. A prophetess, most of her long life had been spent as a widow, living in the service of God in His temple. And now the presence of God comes to His temple and to Anna in the body of an infant, yet Anna recognizes the truth of Simeon's song of joy, for she, too, has been waiting for the redemption of God's people. Like the shepherds that first heard the news of Jesus' birth, Anna responds in thanksgiving and by sharing this Good News with all who had been waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise.

But even more so than Anna or Simeon, Jesus himself is a portrait of faith in intentionally waiting on God's timing. As the writer of the book of Hebrews put it, Jesus, "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame." The Son of God set his sights on the cross in coming to earth to be born as that infant who Mary and Joseph brought to the temple. He set his sights on the cross to bring consolation and redemption to a world in need of forgiveness. He set his sights on the cross to save you and me, we who have been so focused on the *right now*, so that we are *now right* with God.

Through Jesus' perfect life and self-giving death, and in the new life of his resurrection, God has set us free from slavery to immediate gratification: we don't have to chase after the things or experiences that promise a "You, Happier." Even more, we can choose **not** to set our sights on such things! The Holy Spirit keeps turning us, directing our eyes to Jesus' cross, because *that* is where we can find the hope and lasting satisfaction that we really need. The Spirit gives us the ability to wait, even in the face of a sudden desire for immediate gratification – even for a new pair of barefoot (or close to it) shoes.

Like Simeon and Anna, let us go out of the doors of God's house this week, keeping our eyes on the cross of Christ, sharing the Good News of great joy that comes through Jesus, who changes us from being "*right now*" people into people who are *now right* with God.

Amen.