

Christmas 1

December 27, 2020

Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Psalm 148, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:22-40

Bishop Shelley Bryan Wee sermon

Dear Beloveds,

I hope that today's worship filled with music and song fills you up on this first Sunday of Christmas. And even though we aren't gathered in person, I hope that the songs and scriptures today fill you with the knowledge that you are surrounded in holy community and held in the warmth of God's love through the One who comes to us as a babe in Mary's arms.

Grace and peace to you through our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ, Immanuel, God with us.

As humans, singing is something that we do. Songs inspire. Songs comfort. Songs console the broken-hearted, songs bring joy, and songs call people to action. My kids and I have always said to one another, "Life is a musical" and we sing some song that has to do with whatever is happening at the moment.

You could almost say that scripture is a musical. There is so much singing happening in the Bible. Miriam sang when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and they were no longer enslaved. Hannah sang when God finally granted her a child after many years of longing for a baby. David sang and danced with joy when he entered Jerusalem and he sang in sorrow when he grieved the death of two of his children. Elizabeth, pregnant with John the Baptist, sang with anticipation when Mary came to visit. And in response, Mary, pregnant with Jesus, sang of the powerful being brought low and the poor being raised up. And Zechariah, husband to Elizabeth, father to John the Baptist, who was rendered mute for nine months because he had the audacity to backtalk an angel and when he finally gets his voice back he sings of freedom.

Today in the gospel of Luke, we hear Simeon and Anna's songs. First Simeon embraces Jesus and sings. Surprisingly, though, Simeon doesn't sing a lullaby or a sweet song that this baby doesn't cry. Instead, Simeon sings of letting go, of departing, of – truth be told – dying. Simeon sings because God has kept the promise made of old and now Simeon can rest in peace. Simeon sings, "Lord now let your servant go in peace." We all know these words, right? We know them because they are deep in our bones. These words, spoken and sung thousands of time in worship for hundreds of years – Simeon's words are often sung after Holy Communion, Simeon's words conclude the service of Compline, Simeon's words are said or sung at the end of a funeral. Simeon's song has become one of the most familiar and beautiful hymns of the liturgy. "Lord, now let your servant go in peace. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people: a light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel." Simeon, holding Mary's son, singing into his own death. Singing with the hope and promise of God on his breath.

In this nation, there has been a lot of singing into one's death in the past nine months. The average right now is 3000 people dying from COVID every day in the United States. In this past year, so many others have died because of racial violence and domestic violence and so many other types of violence.

And there are ordinary deaths – if we can ever say ordinary deaths – due to other illnesses, age, accident. In the time that we are we are mindful of the many who died without someone singing to them, or themselves singing, because death came too quickly or they couldn't breathe. And so, as we speak of song, we pause and we grieve for those who were unable to lift their voices and sing as Simeon did as he awaited his death after a long life on earth.

Anna sings next. Well, it doesn't say in scripture that Anna sings, and actually we don't know her exact words because they aren't recorded in the book of Luke. We just have a statement that says that she began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. But today, I'm going to take a little license here and say that the Prophet Anna sang. I mean, who cannot sing with a newborn baby in their arms? So I will say, one can imagine, that Anna comes and takes the baby from Simeon and she sings out her praise and thanksgiving to God. Anna, who had lived in the Temple for decades, who was herself 84 years old, now sings to the people around her – not just to Joseph and Mary – but to all gathered – that this baby is what everyone has been waiting for – redemption will come, she sings, from this tiny bundle wrapped in blankets and smelling of his mother's milk. Prophet Anna sang and the world listened. The world stood up. The world continues to hope through Anna's song.

Simeon and Anna – both close to death – holding the one who brings life to the world. Singing for the world to hear. Wow!

I wish that I could tell you that because Christmas has happened, Jesus is born, because we are hearing beautiful music that all is now well in your lives, in your stories, in this nation and in this world. I wish I could tell you that your financial problems, your loneliness, your fear, your anger, your family difficulties, your exhaustion, your whatever you are feeling was just kind of going to disappear. I cannot. Like those before us, we are living in a world where there is good and there is bad.

But at the same time, I actually can tell you that all is now well. And I can tell you this not because of who I am but because we have this story, these songs – from Miriam to Hannah to David to Elizabeth to Mary to Zechariah to Simeon to Anna to the song of Revelation where the cherubim and seraphim sing around the throne of God – and all the songs that are part of the great cloud of witnesses. And even more, we have the Song – the grand first Song - that began this great world of ours when the Spirit – the breath of God swept over the face of the waters and God sang the world into existence and God continues to sing into this world to this day.

Today, as we celebrate the first Sunday of Christmas, may we continue to sing – holding onto the hope that Simeon's promise was fulfilled and Anna's song continues to resonate. Today, as we celebrate the first Sunday of Christmas, may we listen to the voices from scripture and the voices around us, singing us into action. Today, as we celebrate the first Sunday of Christmas, may we hear the song of the One born of Mary, born in a manger, born a baby to free us from all things, born to go to the lost and the least, the forgotten and the despised, born to save this world, born to each one of us, who comes to us in vulnerable flesh singing – that he is the Savior, he is the healer, he is the who is with us so that we might know of God's great love for us and for all people and, knowing this, have hope. He sings, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Amen

**Isaiah 61:10-62:3**

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,  
my whole being shall exult in my God;  
for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation,  
God has covered me with the robe of righteousness,  
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.  
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,  
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,  
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise  
to spring up before all the nations.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,  
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,  
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,  
and her salvation like a burning torch.  
The nations shall see your vindication,  
and all the kings your glory;  
and you shall be called by a new name  
that the mouth of the Lord will give.  
You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord,  
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

**Psalm 148**

Praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord from the heavens;  
praise the Lord in the heights!  
Praise the Lord, all the angels;  
praise the Lord, all the host!

Praise the lord, sun and moon;  
praise the Lord, all you shining stars!  
Praise the Lord, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for the Lord commanded and they were created.  
God established them for ever and ever;  
God fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the Lord from the earth,  
you sea monsters and all deeps,  
fire and hail, snow and frost,

stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills,  
fruit trees and all cedars!  
Wild animals and all cattle,  
creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples,  
princes and all rulers of the earth!  
Young men and women alike,  
old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the Lord,  
for God's name alone is exalted;  
the Lord's glory is above earth and heaven.  
God has raised up a horn for all people,  
praise for all the faithful,  
for the people of Israel who are close to God.  
Praise the Lord!

#### **Galatians 4:4-7**

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent God's son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of the Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer enslaved but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

#### **Luke 2:22-40**

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon;\* this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.\* Guided by the Spirit, Simeon\* came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon\* took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant\* in peace, according to your word; 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.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon\* blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna\* the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child\* to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.