

THEY ALSO SERVE¹
Luke 2: 22-40
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
January 1, 2012

On reading the biblical story of Simeon and Anna, it takes little imagination to think of the last line of John Milton's poem, "On His Blindness:" *They also serve who only stand and wait.*² In an activist world, a world in which doing something is nearly always considered better than doing nothing, a data-driven world in which our worth is often measured by how much we accomplish, Simeon and Anna seem a little odd. Here are two people, both of them elderly, who have spent years waiting, faithfully looking for the fulfillment of a promise.

I

We can imagine this old man, Simeon, standing in the courtyard of the temple, holding a little baby in his arms. He is grinning with giddy joy, or perhaps he has tears streaming down his cheeks. However you picture him, he is full of relief and happiness. And the same is true for Anna, who has been through days of grief and adjustment and waiting, and now she too is giddy with joy.

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² John Milton, "On My Blindness."

But what have they seen, really? They have witnessed no miracle, heard no angelic voices, felt no earthquake or even felt a special breeze from above. It is just a little baby, brought to the temple by his parents. Whatever future this child has is just a vision and a hope. Whatever teaching he might offer will remain hidden for many years. Nothing has happened yet. Herod is still on his throne. Roman soldiers still abuse the citizens of Jerusalem. Crosses of agony and death still stand outside the city gates for all to see and heed. It is still a brutal world, just like it was before they laid eyes on this child.

But here they are staring wide-eyed in wonder, holding this little child before the proud parents. Simeon, described as one who has been *waiting for the consolation of Israel*, declares that he is satisfied now. Likewise, Anna adds her own joy and praise to the moment. She will be telling everybody about this baby for the rest of her days.

II

Of course, the rest of their days were presumably not many, certainly not enough for them to know what would happen to this baby named Jesus. Three decades would pass before he would come onto the stage of history. Simeon and Anna would be long gone by then. They would never know how the drama would play itself out. They would know nothing of his teaching, his healing, his controversies with the religious establishment, his arrest, trial,

crucifixion, or resurrection. But it is precisely there that we can connect with these two elderly people.

What we have is hardly more than they had. We have just a glimpse of God's great purpose of creation. We have the story of Jesus, the witness of the early church, the grandeur as well as the shame of the centuries after Jesus, and we have the inspiration of those around us who remind us of the Way of Christ. But like Simeon and Anna, we can look at the world and see that it is largely the same. Greed and selfishness and brutality still preside over much of the world. Brute power and material wealth seem to carry far more weight and influence than the life of love and humility. Like Simeon and Anna, we are caught in time. We do not have the perspective of the Creator of the Universe.

But also like Simeon and Anna, we have children briefly entrusted to our arms for blessing. Whether in our own family or our church family, we gather them up and pray for them, hoping that they will be filled with wisdom and find solutions to the intractable problems that we have grappled with all our days. We hope that they will make the world a better place.

It is certainly true that we know the rest of the story of Jesus. But like Simeon and Anna, we can only see in the present, and hope for the future. The song that Simeon sings as he holds the baby has become for many a song to

follow communion: *my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples....*

In the symbolism of communion, we hold in our hands not only the past, but also the present and the future. We transcend time for one moment, for the bread and the wine remind us of the *Alpha and the Omega*, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. In a sense, at communion we hold Christ close; in taking the bread and the wine to our lips, we have kissed the Christ child, and with our words and songs and prayers we have caressed his presence. We may not make it all the way to God's planned future, but we have seen it in Christ, and that is enough.

III

At the beginning of a new year, we are grateful for the spirit of Simeon and Anna. *They also serve who only stand and wait.* We wait for the events to unfold in the year 2012, but we wait in faith and hope and confidence, for our eyes have seen God's salvation, and that is enough.