

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Sunday, July 17, 2022**  
**10am**

Text: Luke 2:21-38 (NRSVUE)

[prayer]

This last week NASA released the first pictures from the James Webb Telescope. The world's biggest and most powerful telescope, it launched on Christmas Day with a 21-foot mirror capable of capturing infrared light emanating from deep in space. Six months later the Webb has traveled a million miles away from earth and is now beaming back to humankind our first glimpses of the distant universe. The pictures are magical – glowing nurseries where new stars are being born, pillars of gas and dust seven light-years tall, one galaxy colliding with another, and light from stars that were formed at the dawn of the universe.

If you have not seen the pictures, we will share them on our Facebook page so you can take a look, because this is not a moment to be missed! But even as these images fill us with awe and wonder, so should the telescope's backstory. The James Webb Telescope was a project decades in the making, with some 20,000 people across 29 countries and 14 U.S. states collaborating on its design, construction, and launch. And for a period of time, the project was in jeopardy of never being finished. That is, until Gregory Robinson, a long-time NASA employee, was named director of the project in 2018.

The son of tobacco sharecroppers, Robinson began his education in a racially segregated elementary school. He told National Public Radio recently that living through the process of desegregation taught him how to work with and lead different kinds of people. And though he doesn't say as much, I think it also taught him something about patience, perseverance, and hope. Despite the many obstacles that stood in its way, Robinson did not doubt that the Webb telescope would one day work. He told NPR's Steve Inskeep, "As we moved closer to launch and even as we launched, I never had a concern on the outcome."<sup>1</sup>

Our Scripture lesson today usually falls during the Christmas season in the lectionary – the three-year cycle of Sunday morning readings. But for this worship series we are stepping outside of lectionary time to engage old stories of faith with fresh ears and eyes. Just as the Webb images came to us six months after Christmas, today we are having a little Christmas in July with the story of baby Jesus in the Temple with Simeon and Anna. And in this story, we find the same notes of patience, perseverance, and hope that the Webb images inspire in us.

Forty days after Jesus is born, his parents bring him to the Temple to be dedicated. They have journeyed from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to fulfill the religious law, which says that Jewish women must make a ritual sacrifice after the birth of a male child in order to purify themselves and rejoin the worshipping community (Lev 12:1-8). A lamb was the usual offering, but Mary and Joseph are very poor, so they can only afford two pigeons. They make their purchase and then give the birds to the priest to slaughter on Mary's behalf.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/15/1111658447/gregory-robinson-nasa-james-webb-telescope-director>

The law also says that firstborn children will be dedicated to God. We know the great and terrible purpose that awaits the infant Jesus once he grows up, and so this baby dedication feels especially momentous. But Mary and Joseph don't yet know what will happen to their son. They are simply first-time parents who want to raise their son as a Jew, and a Temple dedication is what good Jews do. They bring him for dedication in much the same way that young parents bring their children to the church to be baptized. Our baptismal tradition includes the naming of godparents – unrelated adults who promise to help raise the child in the faith. Our Scripture lesson contains the prototype of this tradition: an old man named Simeon and an old woman named Anna.

Simeon's name means 'God has heard.' For years Simeon has waited for proof that God has heard His peoples' prayers for deliverance from foreign oppression. Simeon has spent his life waiting for the Messiah. The Holy Spirit once whispered to him that he would not die before the Messiah came. And so, Simeon faithfully has been faithfully standing his watch, a spiritual sentinel. Did he ever feel weary of waiting? Did he ever doubt the promise God had made? I like to think so, otherwise Simeon would not be very human. Faith can make room for doubt, so long as faith gets the last word.

Mary and Joseph are bewildered by and a little wary of this stranger asking to hold their baby. But they can also sense the power of the Holy Spirit resting on him, so they carefully hand Jesus over. The moment is sweet – an old man who has spent his life waiting and watching for the Messiah, gently cradling the answer to his prayers. As Old Testament scholar James C. Howell wrote, "Imagine holding in your arms this most wanted child, the hope of the ages, the yearning of your entire life."

Some of you who have struggled with infertility and waited many years to have children or grandchildren may resonate with Simeon's joy. Personally, I think of my grandparents when I read this story. They waited ten years for their only child, my mother. Her birth was something of a miracle, and my siblings and I are directly descended from that miracle. What I find just as miraculous as the birth, though, is the prayer and faith that preceded the miracle. A miracle is not a miracle unless we believe in the power of God to act upon our lives. Often God answers our prayers in surprising ways, but at the root of prayer is the belief, however small and tenuous, that God is listening and will one day answer.

And so, it is with great reverence, Simeon lifts his face to heaven and declares:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation” (vv. 29-30).

All the prophecies about Jesus are humanized by the sight of this old man holding salvation in his arms, secure in the knowledge that God's promise has at last been fulfilled. In church tradition, Simeon is referred to as the *Theodochos*, which means God-receiver. He is one of the first people in Israel to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. The other person is his counterpart, Anna.

Scripture tells us that Anna is an elderly widow. The widow detail is important. Without the protection and provision of a husband, Anna is among the poorest and most vulnerable members of society. She has been widowed for most of her life, and she worships and fasts at the Temple daily. Perhaps Anna spent all her time at the Temple because it was the one place of refuge and safety she could find. She may even have been fed from the alms collected from Temple visitors.

Anna's role in this story is quieter than Simeon's. Our gospel writer, Luke, chose to portray her that way, but it does not mean that her presence is less important than Simeon's; in fact, her presence is extremely significant. Luke is always emphasizing the special place that the poor and marginalized have in God's kingdom. Anna's presence is an exclamation point at the end of this story. Of all the people God could choose to be present at Jesus' dedication, God chose one of the least, one of the most forgettable, in the eyes of society.

Why did God choose Anna in particular? Luke does not say. But he does call her a prophet. The word prophet conjures stories of Old Testament figures like Elijah and Isaiah, who urged Israel to repent from their sins, performed powerful sign-acts, and predicted major historical events. But a prophet is truthfully anyone who points to what God is doing in the world and says, "Pay attention."

On the screens are a drawing of "Anna the Prophetess" by artist Lisle Gwynn Garrity. Lisle based her drawing on images of Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa is remembered for her great acts of charity and compassion, but she was also a prophet. She once said, "I know I am touching the living body of Christ in the broken bodies of the hungry and the suffering." She saw God in the people society had cast aside, and through her tender and faithful ministry, she taught others to do the same. That is prophetic.

I think Anna was much the same. Her quiet faith and devotion in spite of the grief and poverty she suffered were a prophetic witness to the powerful hope that she held in God's promise of a Messiah who would one day deliver people like her from their suffering.

Again, when I read this story, I think of my grandparents, and especially my grandmother. When I was eight years old, they moved from Colorado to Spokane to be closer to their three grandchildren. It was always a treat to spend the night at Grandma and Grandpa's house. When it was time for bed, my grandmother would ask the three of us to kneel at our bedside. She would then kneel next to us and lead us in saying our prayers. Now, I know I was taught the Lord's Prayer in Sunday School, but the words made a permanent home in my heart when I prayed them with my grandma. Through their actions, my grandparents taught me about the steady discipline of prayer: Prayer before meals, prayer before bed, and to this day they still send me notes to tell me they are praying for me. Given how anxious and changeable our culture has become, that kind of steady, disciplined spiritual practice is another powerful witness. Their faithfulness in prayer, as well as the faithfulness demonstrated by a handful of cherished saints in churches I have served, has made a prophetic difference in my life. Their commitment inspires me in my own spiritual practice as I seek to notice God in my everyday life.

Faithfulness is also Simeon and Anna's witness. Like Gregory Robinson's faith that the James Webb Telescope would one day give us a detailed glimpse of the heavens, Simeon and Anna had faith that God would one day fulfill God's promise of a Messiah. But not only did they *have* faith, they also *kept* and *preserved* the faith that was handed down to them from previous generations, so that a new generation would know the same hope that had been planted and grown in them.

In this story we get a taste of the power of a multigenerational church: the old, the young, and those in-between, sharing and tending and growing their faith together. The church is one of the last places in our society where different generations can be in community with each other. Scripture commands older adults to invest in young believers and strengthen the church for the future. But handing down the faith is not just about handing down our theology, doctrine, and tradition. It is certainly not about handing down a style of worship or particular way of being church. To keep the faith for the next generation is to hand down the hope we have received in Jesus Christ. To keep the faith for the next generation is to live our lives in such a way that they are always pointing to God and saying “Pay attention. See what God has done?”

I am grateful to Greg Robinson for keeping his faith in the James Webb Telescope – those pictures are stunning, and I see such evidence of God in them! But I am even more grateful to my grandparents and others like them for keeping and passing on *the* faith. Their witness helped train my eyes to notice God’s salvation working itself out in my life and the world around me. In the coming months, as we explore together what it means to be a church for the future, let us take time to think about the ways the faith was kept for us and handed down to us and appreciate what we have received. And then let us ask God to show us how we are called to hand that faith on to the next generation of believers. May we all be prophets pointing the way to God.

Amen.