

“Attending”
December 27, 2020

Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Luke 2:21-38

When we worship in person, I always wonder who will attend worship on this Sunday after Christmas.

Often, like many a weary minister, I take some time off and am not in attendance.

Maybe it's a little easier this year to log on and check out this worship service. But I've found that it is usually the older members who are attending worship in the days between Christmas and the New Year—people who have developed the habit of worship over decades.

And, yes, they are usually the people without the demands of family and work that can be so great at this time of year.

With this in mind, I was struck as I read the lesson from the Gospel of Luke that it is about attending—and what it means to attend throughout the year.

These days after Christmas are always a time of shifting and readjusting. The busyness of the past month—all kinds of preparations and celebrations—begin to subside. Guests are leaving—or, if you have been a guest, you return home. It doesn't take long for some of the decorations to seem a little, I don't know, out of place, as if they no longer fit.

We start to think of the week, the month, the year ahead.

This year, of course, it's a little different. This year everything is different.

There were probably fewer fetes and fewer feasts to prepare. Maybe you bought fewer presents and saw fewer people. Maybe you were neither a host nor a guest.

Even so, most of us are turning from Bethlehem long ago to our lives here in the coming week and month and year.

There is the hope-filled expectation that the new vaccines give us—that much of 2021 will *not* be like 2020. That slowly life will begin to look like what we call “normal,” that our separation from one another will end, that trips to the grocery store will no longer be fraught with anxiety.

None of this will come quickly or without setbacks. We are still warned that the coming months will bring more deaths and illness with them. The year ahead will have its own challenges, but they will be new and different from what we have faced already.

So we are helped today by the way Luke presents the story of the birth of Jesus.

We are not allowed to linger at the manger.

With only one verse, we skip over a month's time, we leave Bethlehem, and we find ourselves with Mary and Joseph at the Temple in Jerusalem.

There we encounter two elderly people: Simeon and Anna. They are not a couple. They are two individuals who have spent a great deal of time attending to their lives and to the life of the city and nation in which they lived. They have spent their lives paying attention to the daily, the mundane.

Simeon is old—or at least that’s how we usually imagine him. His understanding—Luke says it is a revelation by the Holy Spirit, not something he arrived at through thought or reflection—is that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah—the Hebrew word means “the anointed one”—the Christ of God.

Simeon pays attention and looks forward. Sometime in the hoped-for future he will see what he longs for. This attention brings this old man to the Temple on the day when those two young parents arrive carrying their infant son.

As he takes this baby into his arms, he sees the salvation—the word means “wholeness,” it means “health,” it means “well-being”—he sees the salvation of God that has been made ready for all people. And so he says to God: “My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation of the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel.”

How does one see in a baby such a light, such a salvation?

I think this has something to do with the way Simeon looks at the world, the way he pays attention, the way he attends to what is present before him. This baby does not remove Simeon from the world, but shows him a God who enters the world, bringing light and life to all.

Also in the Temple that day is Anna, a prophet. It is not unusual to find Anna in the Temple, of course. Luke tells us that she had lived in the temple for decades, worshipping there “with fasting and prayer night and day.”

Ann is a prophet—one of the few women prophets mentioned in either the Old or New Testaments. And we need to remember that, as Robert MacAfee Brown said some time ago that a prophet is not one who *foretells* the future, but one who *tells forth* the word of God. Prophets claim to speak for the Holy One of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth.

When prophets speak, they don’t beat around the bush or trade in generalities. They are concrete, specific. They speak about widows and orphans, the poor and the hungry, who are victims of crippling economic systems. They speak about the faithlessness of rulers and common people.

That is to say, they attend to and speak about the very things that concern us today.

The great 20th century rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, said of all the prophets: “Ultimately they are concerned about God’s love for human beings, which is why they are so upset.”

Anna is indeed a prophet, concerned about God’s love for human beings, seeing and then *telling forth* something astonishing. She sees in this child a reason to praise God. And what Anna sees, she wants to announce to all who were waiting for the “redemption of Jerusalem.”

Anna is a prophet, who, like Isaiah, will not keep silent, will not rest, because in her attention she sees the well-being of God shining in this child.

In Simeon and Anna we see lives spent in attending, in looking, in being present to this world. As a result, they are able to see what God might be doing in the world.

And what they see is change: falling and rising, redemption, salvation.

What they see is the new way in which God is working in their world that longs for what the prophet Isaiah calls “vindication,” a restoration and renewal.

But Luke does not pit the old against the young and neither should we.

For we also see Mary and Joseph, the young couple with a young child, attending to what needs to be done. They come to the Temple offer sacrifice, to do what is fitting before God.

We see two parents responding in faith and love to their child.

And in attending to their present situation, they are able to see and hear the wonderful news of what God is doing in the world. The good news of Christmas is that the everyday, the ordinary has been filled with the glory of God.

And so we are brought back to our days, our world.

The year ahead will be one for paying attention, abiding, watching and observing.

Parents will attend to the needs and the lives of their children—making sure they continue to wear masks to protect themselves and others, making sure that they are learning either in person or remotely, making sure that they are distant yet connected to others.

We will attend to this congregation, to our worship and to our work, to the sublime and the mundane the mix when people worship and work.

We will continue to see health care workers attending to the needs of patients.

We will continue to see individuals—especially older people—attending to life in new ways while living in separation, attending to their home or their room.

We will continue to see workers attending to the well-being of their customers and employers attending to the well-being of their businesses and their employees.

In that attending, we will discover again the presence of God in the ordinary, in the day to day—that is, in our lives.

Perhaps this, then is why we do move so quickly from Christmas back to the rest of life—especially this year. For we have seen and heard once more that God has entered our world, and that this life that we have, with all of its challenges and present difficulties, is lived in this world that is good enough for God and good enough for us.