

Long-Awaited Gift, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. C1081228
Isaiah 61:10-62:3 and Luke 2:22-40

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Sue, Margaret, and I just spent Christmas at our daughter's and son-in-law's home in Apex, North Carolina. Of course, the main attraction was our seventeen-month-old granddaughter, Miller. We played with her, ate with her, changed her diaper, and marveled at the ways in which we can see her maturing, not the least of which is to be able to hear her say, "grandpa," "grandma," and "G. G." (which stands for "great grandmother"). On Christmas afternoon, we went for a walk in her neighborhood. We adults walked, but Miller, to keep up with our walking pace, virtually ran the mile-long distance. She would stop here and there to study the flowers, the stream, and the leaves on the trees. It is a joy to watch the world open up to her.

We love to watch children grow and mature. The stole I am wearing has the hand prints of the children who were here when I was installed as Senior Minister here five years ago. The hands of these children are much larger now and the children themselves have matured.

We often don't think about Jesus' growing and maturing. The tradition of the church is to bring Jesus into the world as a full-blown infant messiah, as if he came knowing everything about creation. It makes one wonder whether he came into the world complete with the vocabulary of Aramaic and maybe Greek too! I like to think of Jesus as learning to call his mama, and dada, as learning to crawl and walk, and as discovering the world opening up around him. I like to think of his being tenderly nurtured by his parents.

Jesus' parents did what they were supposed to do according to the law. When Jesus was about a month and a half old, they took him to the temple for the ritual of purification of the mother and the redemption of the firstborn son. The firstborn belonged to God, and had to be redeemed with an offering.

While they were there doing their religious duty, they met two people, according to Luke, Simeon and Anna. Who were Simeon and Anna? They were simply an old man and an old woman. They were unrelated to each other, but each of them was looking and waiting for something. Just like a couple of grandparents, they looked upon this infant with hope, the same way Sue and I look upon our granddaughter.

Simeon and Anna represented the faithful of Israel. Simeon was "righteous and devout... and the Holy Spirit rested on him."¹ Anna, an eighty-four year old prophet, worshiped in the temple "with fasting and prayer night and day."²

Simeon and Anna lived in the tension between God's kingdom and Caesar's kingdom. They were looking for God's salvation from the injustice and terror they saw around them. As Simeon took the baby Jesus into his arms, he sang a Christmas Carol, "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."³

¹Luke 2:25

²Luke 2:37

³Luke 2:29-32

Simeon warned the baby's parents that the baby would be "destined for the falling and 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."⁴ He knew that as this baby grew and matured, and as it lived in the way God calls us to live, he would create a tension with the powers of the world.

There are three songs sung around the birth of Jesus, according to Luke: the song of John's father Zechariah, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."⁵; the song of Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."⁶; and the song of Simeon. These three songs are about more than what happens in church during religious observances. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write, "These hymns proclaim and remind us that the God of the Bible is concerned about the whole of life...this language is about how the world should be."⁷

How often have you heard that politics have no place in church? Politics have always been in church. Borg and Crossan write, "The Magnificat and the Benedictus—and the Christmas stories and the Bible as a whole—combine what we often separate, namely, religion and politics, spirituality and a passion for this world."⁸

Simeon has been waiting his whole life for this moment. Now, he has seen God's salvation, and he can die in peace. James Howell draws an important if subtle distinction between the way the world sees things, and the way of the gospel: "Notice the order," he writes. "In the world, it's rise and fall. The rise and fall of the Third Reich, the rise and fall of the business tycoon, the rise and fall of a movie star. But with Jesus it's fall and rise...We fall, and from that lowest point, we rise."⁹ Jesus spoke about the growth of a seed. It must be planted (it "falls"). Then, it grows ("rises"). Jesus suffered and died, then was raised to glory.

Jesus reveals God's dream for this world. What would it mean if we were to recognize every newborn baby as the one who reveals God's dream for this world? Think about our children and our children's children and the world in which they will live. Will they be able to look back on us as their ancestors, and say that we extended God's extravagant welcome to all? Will they be able to say that we dreamed of them and built this place as a place of justice and love? Will they be able to say that like Simeon, we have been waiting for them? Simeon looked beyond the baby Jesus and saw the Christ, the Promised Messiah. Wouldn't it be neat if we could see Christ in one another, and in every single person we met?

The songs in Luke's gospel that relate to Jesus's birth are songs that include conflict and joy. There is the tension between the world of Caesar, the Pharisees, and power, and the world as God wants it to be. Jesus would grow into an adult and create conflict: Instead of a pax Romana, he proclaimed the peace of God.

Amid our tensions and conflict, we can still sing, "Joy to the World, the Lord is come!"

⁴Luke 2:34-35

⁵Luke 1:67 ff.

⁶Luke 1:46 ff.

⁷Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth* © 2007, Harper Collins Publishers, p. 23

⁸Ibid.

⁹James Howell, "Theological Perspective" on Luke 2:22-40, *Feasting on the Word* © 2008, Westminster John Knox Press, p. 168