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 Woodhaven Presbyterian Church  
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 Luke 2:22-40

### Expert Witnesses

Mary and Joseph must have decided early on in her pregnancy that they really wanted to do everything just right. After all, Jesus' conception was so...well, unusual would be one way to put it. Therefore, given the complexity surrounding this birth, Mary and Joseph must have decided that they were going to need all the help they could get in raising this boy-child. So they turned to the rituals of their Jewish faith.

First, at eight days old, Jesus was circumcised, just like every other Jewish baby boy, as a symbol of the covenant. And then, about a month after his birth, they observed the second ritual—the service of Purification. This particular service was primarily meant for Mary so that she could be admitted back into worship. But in Luke's version of events, Mary's purification ritual is blended with the Service of Dedication for Jesus. So Luke tells us they all went to the Temple on that day: the mom, the dad, and the baby.

But quickly, our storyteller Luke becomes less interested in the holy family and more interested in two very old adults named Simeon and Anna. Now, neither Simeon nor Anna read newspapers, listened to the radio, or watched the nightly news to keep them informed of the happenings of the day. Instead of the media, they turned to their sacred writings—the texts we call the Old Testament.

Just as some people today keep tabs on the world through the internet, Simeon and Anna kept tabs on their world by watching people arrive at the Temple. In particular, they were watching for someone really important to show up. Someone who would change the world. Someone who was the Messiah, the promised one.

But who were these two people, these two Messiah look-outs? And why on earth did Luke think it was so important for us to see them and hear them immediately after Christmas?

We will start with Simeon. According to Luke, Simeon was not just old and experienced, but he was also very righteous. Simeon was an expert witness, particularly for those who are theological traditionalists. He was solid. He knew his Torah and possessed a deep faith. Simeon was well-credentialed in the Temple circles. Every day, Simeon positioned himself at the Temple. He firmly expected the Messiah was going to show up one day. So, he checked out every face that passed by his post. He would even peek at each little baby carried by him. "Is this the one for whom we are waiting?" he would ask himself.

Day after day, year after year, Simeon waited and watched. On that particular day, he spotted Mary, Joseph and their baby as they made their way to the entrance. His heart skipped a beat. He felt propelled towards that little family. Not wanting to scare them, Simeon inquired if he could see their baby and just hold him for a moment. Mary might have felt hesitant at handing her newborn to a stranger, but she carefully passed the old man her tiny, month-old, infant son.

Simeon took the baby, pulled down the corner of the blanket, looked into the baby's face, and began talking and smiling at Jesus. It is what you and I do when we see a little new bundle in the arms of his or her parents. But then, Simeon did something we probably do **not** do. He began to sing at the top of his lungs.

Lord, bid Your servant go in peace,/ Your word is now fulfilled./These eyes have seen

salvation's dawn,/ This child so long foretold./This is the Savior of the world,/ The Gentiles'  
promised light,/God's glory dwelling in our midst,/ The joy of Israel.

Simeon, holding that new baby boy in his arms, lifted him to the sky and sang a song of thanksgiving for the gift of that child. A child he called “A light to the Gentiles, glory to the Jews”. For Simeon’s Spirit-guided intuition told him that this baby was a Savior for everybody—both Jew and Gentile. Through his song, you can sense the exuberance at his discovery.

But then, immediately after he stopped singing, Simeon’s mood quickly changed. After singing his song, he became very serious. He told the young parents, Mary in particular, “This child is set for the rise and fall of many.” In other words, Mary you better get ready because your son is going to be very controversial. People are going to be divided over this child. And then Simeon leaned over and whispered Mary’s ear, “A sword will pierce your soul also.” Mary must have shuddered when she heard such a chilling statement. Her baby boy’s future was going to break his mother’s heart.

But then, without giving us much time to reflect on Simeon’s words, Luke shifts the spotlight and introduces us to Anna, his next expert witness. Luke tells us she was a prophet, an authority on mystery and holiness. When Anna saw the baby Jesus, she broke into glad “praising of God. She began to tell all who were looking for the redemption of Israel about that baby Jesus”.

But, unlike Simeon, Anna’s voice was not the voice of a traditionalist. She did not possess the pedigree of proper theological education. But Anna was an expert witness for Christmas, nevertheless. She was an expert witness because she was an expert in hardship. Luke tells us she had been a widow for decades in a culture and in a time when there was no safety net. Widows with no children occupied the bottom rung of the socioeconomic ladder. And therefore, as a very old widow, Anna knew pain and sorrow. When Anna speaks to us as an expert witness, she is speaking as a graduate of the school of hard knocks, one who had been through everything that life could throw at her. So when she sees that baby and speaks about him as the Messiah of God now present among the people, her voice, her witness, rings with authenticity and extreme credibility.

Form me, Anna’s witness is particularly credible because her faith had been tested in the crucible of suffering, and yet emerged stronger. To use Hemmingway’s phrase, she had been broken by life, but had grown stronger at those broken places. Anna’s witness to God’s clear presence in that baby must have been powerful for Joseph and for Mary. Perhaps mother Mary received some courage from Anna, a woman who had herself lived through heartbreak.

So okay – we see why Simeon and Anna’s witnesses were probably very important for Joseph and for Mary and even for their own lives. But, we still have to ask why Luke wanted US to see these two people—Simeon and Anna. Why would Luke use the same amount of words to tell us about Simeon and Anna as he did to tell us the entire birth story, the entire Christmas story? Why is it just as important to Luke that we hear their witness about Jesus with the same intensity as we heard about Jesus’ birth?

I think it is because Luke knew what the day after Christmas looked like. For Simeon and Anna, on the day after Christmas, the Romans still occupied the land. Jesus’ birth hadn’t changed that. Joseph and Mary’s taxes continued to rise. The Word becoming flesh hadn’t changed that. The rich kept getting richer, and the poor continued to grow poorer. The manger had not changed that. Not all of the sick got well. Widows were still widows. Death still knocked on everyone’s door. None of those facts changed on the day after Christmas. From first glance, it appeared that the problems that plagued the world **before** the first Christmas were still there to plague the world **after** the first Christmas.

And we saw the same thing in our world this week. On the day after Christmas, we were still at war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Christmas did not change that. Trust me - the ER and ICUs of Children's Medical Center are still filled to capacity with sick kids and their shell-shocked families. The celebration of Jesus' birth did not change that. The unemployment lines continue to grow. We have another rose in the chancel due to death from brain cancer. The Word becoming Flesh, the manger, the light coming into the world seem not to have radically changed any of that, either.

So perhaps Luke knew that the day after Christmas, the Sunday after Christmas, we would be asking this question in the back of our minds, "Luke, are you sure this is the Messiah? Luke, are you sure this little baby boy named Jesus is the one for whom we have been waiting?"

I think Luke expected those kinds of questions. Because he answers us by saying, "I'll put two expert witnesses on the stand for you. First, you can see and hear Simeon's testimony and song. He represents tradition, training and knowledge. He is well-credentialed and socially acceptable.

But then, Anna will follow Simeon on the witness stand. Because Anna knows what it is to **have** faith when there is every reason in the world not to have **any**. Anna knows how to believe when the Christmas glow fades and the world returns to its pre-Christmas pace and state. Anna knows how to believe when the problems return, when sorrow and grief raise their ugly heads, and when life is **not** happily ever after. And yet, Anna, just like Simeon, also testifies to the powerful presence of God in this baby. Even in the face of all she has lived, she still testifies to the embrace of God which is Jesus."

Luke knew our post-Christmas questions. He and his community had them as well. And so he says to us: Listen to these witnesses. Their own world did not bloom into a garden of roses simply because Jesus was born. They were not rescued from their problems. No one came and made it all better for them.

**BUT**, both of them knew that because of that baby Jesus, the one being carried into the Temple that day in his mother's arms, **God was now in it with them**. In the messiness, in the fear, in the darkness, in the beauty—God was immersed in it all through that baby Jesus. As our expert witnesses, Anna and Simeon proclaim to us that God does not dwell **above** our world, but **in** our world.

Our expert witnesses Anna and Simeon knew the Christmas secret. They knew that in Jesus, God entered into our human brokenness as a child and took it all in. They knew that in Jesus, though God was offering us **minimum protection** by coming as a baby, God was also offering us **maximum support**<sup>i</sup> by that surprising, grace-filled act.

And so Luke wanted us to hear their witness, their testimonies, on this Sunday after Christmas. He wanted to spend the same amount of time and words on **their** testimony as he did on the testimony of the angels and the shepherds on the night of the birth. For perhaps, Luke hoped their courage and their resilience would enable us to share our testimony of God's power in the manger to our post-Christmas world. Perhaps Luke hoped that **we** would become **today's** expert witnesses, singing our own songs of praise, holding on to our faith, and telling our post-Christmas world all that we have seen and heard. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> This phrase was coined by the wonderful prophet/preacher/pastor Dr. William Sloane Coffin.