

If you are sitting there thinking I have heard those names before...Anna and Simeon...it's because some years, we get this gospel reading the Sunday after Christmas, and some years when Feb 2 is a Sunday, we hear them anew...now we are not that far removed from the last Christmas, but for a variety of reasons, at least for me, it feels like Christmas and our celebration of the birth of Jesus seems like forever ago...

So it is on this somewhat chilly, very snowy Sunday morning we hear of these two figures...Anna and Simeon who further the story of the baby born in a manger no matter if that feels like just yesterday or forever ago.

Some pastors may go straight for the joy that Anna and Simeon much have felt...playing up their child-like joy at seeing Jesus, face-to-face. I never want to be guilty of diminishing joy, but my own experience is that joy is often not as joyful as it could be unless it has engaged in a long, drawn-out stare down with something that threatens to push it out of sight--joy often vanquishes something as it becomes real: despair, hopelessness, physical pain, perhaps a deep, disquieting grief that one's life never lived up to expectations.

We don't know a ton about Anna or Simeon, but I would imagine that the world of Jesus time could not have been a comfortable place for the aged to persevere. No climate control, no pain relief, little capacity to mitigate the embarrassing or just plain uncomfortable effects of the body's natural process of breaking down. There was physical pain in their bodies, morning, noon, and night--a burden that grew heavier with the dawn of each day.

Was there something more? Confusion, social isolation, an inability to sleep well, irritability, gaps in the memory, and delusions are all common as we age. There is this frustrating sense that you can't keep up, that the world doesn't need you, that your body and mind that have been your bread-and-butter have sold you out. I confess that I haven't always been understanding, even as a pastor. And I am sure most of us have either heard or even participated in conversations where the graying of the church is discussed like it's a mortal wound--evidence of a church's irrelevance. Let me very clear here...we all want kids and young people in the church...but at the same time, any church can be very much alive and growing with a ton of gray hair too..

Because the thing is--more times than not--when I've sat with older adults, I walk away blown away by how openhearted and faithful and even visionary they are. I spend time traveling around the synod and it is no exaggeration to say that the older folks can be just as full of vibrancy, and mission, and good news as the younger folks among us...civil rights pioneers, anti-war activists, battling the war on poverty, turning the parsonage into a home for refugees, leading the way to become and RIC congregation . Older folks like Simeon and Anna are often the soul of our church: they are the ones who keep the prayer list and pray over the names and the personal tragedies asking God for mercy upon mercy; they prepare dinners for the family where the young mother is receiving chemo; they sit quietly alongside friends when they have lost their spouse of fifty years; they attend an otherwise sparse daytime funeral for the member who suffered for years with untreated mental illness, and they sit in the pews every Sunday, whether the sermon is good or lousy or somewhere in between.

As we get older and we continue in the journey of faith, there continues to be joy. There's probably more joy there than I can even imagine. Even and especially when the world seems upside down and inside out...or maybe that's just me.

And I noticed something else about Anna and Simeon. Something that many of our wise elders also have in common, that guided by the Holy Spirit, they always for their best to point to Jesus, and to share God's love in and around the world, and in and around us. In any and all circumstances...when all seems right in the world and when everything seems so very wrong. Filled with the promise of that same Holy Spirit, we, like Anna and Simeon, can praise God and always seek God's love and mercy in the world

Today, Faith in Okemos celebrates the coming of a new messenger of the good news, the story of Jesus, our Lord and savior, some who will at times walk alongside you, sometimes run ahead of you, and sometimes try to herd you forward from behind...your new pastor, Pastor Megan.

As Pastor Megan begins her ministry to and with you in this place, together, you can be Anna and Simeon for one another...praising God and sharing the story of Jesus, who brings love, grace, and mercy to all people.

She will share with you how God is at work in her life, this congregation, the church at large and the world around us. She will find joy with you, and dwell with you in your grief. She will

pray with you, teach you, and learn from you. She will baptize, preach, administer the sacraments, marry, and bury you. She will try to live a life worthy of her calling to be pastor here, and most importantly she will share the story of Jesus with you...from before he was born, leaping in Mary's womb, to meeting Anna and Simeon, to the performing of miracles, the teaching of parables, the healings, wandering around in desert, all the way to the cross and then to the empty tomb where Mary Magdalene recognized who she thought was the gardener as Jesus when he simply said her name. Pastor Megan will be her own version of Anna and Simeon, and so will all of you. She will not be perfect, no pastor is...neither is any congregation. She will forget to visit, not because she didn't want to, but because she didn't know you wanted or needed a visit, and she is not a mind reader. She will not always agree with you, nor you with her.

And when you or she stumbles in your faith or when you all stand firm in your faith for the sake of others, we can always and forever count in God's faithfulness to us, and continue to share the story of Jesus with a world that needs to hear it ever so much. Thanks be to God! Amen