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**Sermon – First Sunday of Christmas**  
**“Anticipated and Still Surprised”**  
**Luke 2:21-40**  
**December 30, 2018**

In an essay written for the New York Times, Gregg Easterbrook contemplated Christmas both as a day on our calendar every year and an event unparalleled in history. Christmas as a day he wrote, is the essence of anticipation. With bundled, tissue papered, glossy wrapped gifts anticipation is the best part. After being opened, he wrote; *“gifts pass from the realm of promise into the constrained world of material possessions...open a gift, and like a coffee can, the possibilities whoosh away, never to be recovered.”*

Maybe that was true of some things you've opened this week - and as December draws to a close comes the realization there is not really anything to look forward to...unless you count the exchanging of some of those *“this isn't what I had in mind”* items you tore or carefully opened on Monday. With Christmas be it the day or the gifts, what precedes often seems better than what is. That is if we restrict Christmas to a day or a season or yes even a gift, instead of the event that forever altered the destiny of humankind.

Take as proof a couple of old souls named Simeon and Anna. Luke tells us they were both full of anticipation. Our lesson today says Simeon was *“looking for the consolation of Israel”* – that was a mighty big gift on his list I'd say. Then one day he holds that consolation in his arms. Now what? Simeon's anticipation was owed its origin to Malachi 3:1, which said *“suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple”*. So he, and Anna like him, went to that temple, day, after day, after day. Their stories proves the exception - sometimes something hoped for turns out better than you ever imagined.

One of the things I find interesting, and if I may slightly disappointing, is how no Christmas pageant in my memory, no Christmas card either, ever includes Simeon and Anna. Well, what kid would want to play the part of an old man or old woman who was about to die? Yet these folks are vital to the story Luke tells. Luke's gospel crafts a story of how God brings about the “reversal of fortune” in people's lives. The stage of Luke's gospel is the Christmas story, featuring tiny Bethlehem, despised shepherds, powerless Joseph and Mary forced from their home by a Roman Emperor and yet who are all “given places of honor”.

Then he adds an old man and woman to the league of honor – dime a dozen old Jews. There were plenty of priests in the temple court that day, but Mary, Joseph and Jesus went to a old man and woman brimming with anticipation kindled by prayer and the belief God could, and would do mighty and merciful things for his people. Anticipation made the crust of old age a little less brittle. Like under mistletoe, it's not the kiss that matters but knowing someone you're fond of has decided to join you there, eh? Knowing someone loves you is a good feeling. Imagine what Simeon felt then, when Mary stepped forward and offered her son to wrinkled arms. His song testifies he was sure the wait was worth it, and his fortunes were now forever reversed.

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Simeon's anticipation, fueled by the witness of the Old Testament, was that it was Israel's destiny was to give birth to Messiah, the reconciler of God and humanity. He knew the prophet Malachi meant that when the Lord '*came suddenly to the temple*', it would be to judge it, and then replace it. A great exchange, a great reversal of fortune would occur – God, no longer confined to a place but alive in a person. Give Simeon this much. He knew his scriptures and what he was looking for in life. And he found it in Jesus Christ.

One of the saddest things about many people today is that we aren't always sure what we're looking for, what we want out of life. A Mother Goose rhyme that if I read once to my kids I read it a hundred times went; "*Pussy cat, pussy cat, where have you been? I've been to London to visit the Queen. Pussy cat, pussy cat, what did you there? I frightened a little mouse under her chair.*" I'm not much of a cat lover, but don't you find it incredible that the queen was right there, and the dumb cat got all tangled up with a mouse.

Incredible, but scores of people do much the same today. Christmas has come - not just the day, but the historic reality of God among us, God with us, and God for us, and we don't know what to do with it. The day comes and goes and we go back to being distracted by the world's "mice" failing to grasp that we are living under the throne of the king. It would be easy, but wrong, to assume that Simeon and Anna express joy in the Lord simply because, as old folks, their days are numbered, they're about to check out, while Joseph and Mary and their generation will have to sort out and contend with a world that Jesus' birth did not altar, not in any demonstrative way that is. Simeon and Anna may express a desire to leave, but Luke's inclusion of their story does not suggest that death is the only way to fulfillment and joy for a human being.

At least that's not what Luke goes on to assert in his gospel. Reversal of fortune is for the here and now. Luke holds out great hope in fact, that while the world and the people who live in it will continue to sin, struggling both to understand and follow Jesus, and have all sorts of hopes dashed, the gift of Christmas will not disappoint, including those who enjoy it in the present. Christmas is intended to show us what might be. What God gave was the hope that this world might yet elevate itself, become more humane, its citizens more deserving of one another. The gift of God in Jesus Christ might not have turned out that way – yet, but it doesn't mean it won't. Elusive does not mean impossible.

An Appalachian folk carol says: "*I wonder as I wander out under the sky; how Jesus the Savior did come for to die; for poor ornery people like you and like I; I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*" Good thought to ponder – how ornery people like you and like I have received so amazing a grace as Christmas. That would be a gift truly – to ponder such every day. For then, Christmas would never disappoint, 00because its wonder would never go away. AMEN