

Promises Kept

The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring & Mary Haro

***Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

***First Sunday after Christmas
January 1, 2012***

Luke 2:22-40 (NRSV)

Reflection 1: The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring

Jesus' parents were good Jews. They said their prayers. They observed the High Holy Days. They abided by Jewish Law. And, according to Luke 2:21-40, eight days after his birth, Mary and Joseph presented their child, Jesus, for circumcision. They made an offering at the Temple. And, Mary participated in the customary ritual of purification for new mothers.

Through this ritual of circumcision, Jesus was officially welcomed into the Jewish community, and given his Hebrew name.

The circumcision, or "bris," as modern Jews refer to this event, the offering, and the ritual of purification were normative practices for good Jewish families. What was remarkable about today's gospel reading wasn't the liturgical events, but what occurred after these rituals took place.

After the offerings, prayers, and naming were done, Mary and Joseph prepared to leave the Temple. As they were about to leave, they encountered the prophets Simeon and Anna, who reaffirmed for them what the prophets and angels had told them about their son. Simeon and Anna said that Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfillment of the prophets' promises.

When Simeon laid eyes on Jesus, he took the baby into his arms, praised God, and said:

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 glory to your people Israel.

Those of you who come from high church backgrounds will recognize these words as the *Nunc Dimittus* (as it is called in Latin), or the *Song of Simeon*, (as we refer to the title in English.)

This is a song that is typically sung by a choir or soloist, or played on the organ at the close of a funeral in high church traditions, like Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran churches.

The *Song of Simeon* expresses Simeon's belief that he can die in peace whenever his time comes, because he has seen the Messiah and knows that by God's grace his salvation and the salvation of the world is assured.

Though we don't often sing the *Nunc Dimittus* in United Church of Christ congregations, we haven't completely lost it from our liturgies. The *Nunc Dimittus* or *Song of Simeon* appears in the service music, in the back of our *New Century Hymnal*. You'll find it on page 808.

Mary and Joseph were amazed by Simeon's proclamation, and by what happened next. Simeon blessed the holy family, and told Mary that Jesus was meant for true greatness—that he would lead the world in the ways of God—even though many would reject him.

Anna followed the Song of Simeon with a reprise in her own words, explaining that Jesus was the one for whom she and all Israel had been waiting, and she praised God for sending their long-awaited Redeemer.

Simeon and Anna are interesting and important characters in the Christmas story—as interesting and as important as the shepherds, the Wisemen, and the angels. Most of us don't know much about them, because they only show up in the Common Lectionary once every three years, and when they do, they make their appearance on the Sunday after Christmas when church attendance is not at a peak. So who were these characters?

Simeon and Anna were prophets who lived in the Jerusalem Temple. They were also persons of mature faith and mature years. Anna, it seems, was widowed early in life and had been praying and working at the Temple since she lost her husband. Simeon, by contrast, seems to have come to the Temple a short time before Jesus' presentation.

As interesting as it would be to know more about the individual biographies of Simeon and Anna, the symbolic role that they play is more important than their individual stories in the Christmas narrative.

Simeon and Anna were what you might call Jesus' "spiritual grandparents." They were the people who looked into his eyes and saw the promise that he represented for the whole world, and they proclaimed that promise to everyone who had ears to hear their message.

Reflection 2: Mary Haro

Today's scripture strikes a powerfully familiar chord in my heart. Simeon and Anna had waited faithfully for many years to see God's promise of a Messiah fulfilled. They prayed that their steadfast belief in the prophecies would be rewarded. And they hoped it would happen in their lifetime. I had a dream, too.

My parents taught me to believe in the power of hope. In the context of the current season, my eight siblings and I would hope for our favorite gifts to appear under the Christmas tree. Moving into my teenage years, I hoped for the day when I would find Mr. Right, and we would settle down in a lovely home and raise a family.

It's interesting to me to look back now on the promise of a wonderful future that I took for granted, and to realize that that promise is actually playing out for me now. However, the path I followed to find that promise was not as smooth as I had perhaps naively envisioned. The labyrinth of my life took a few unexpected twists and turns before I realized that God's mysterious ways were at work in my life.

Most of you are aware that I have three children: My son David is Josiah's dad – some of you have met David and my daughter-in-law Katie, and my youngest grandson Aiden. My youngest son, Rick, is enjoying the single life in San Francisco. And my daughter is the oldest, recently moved from Alaska to the Dallas, Texas area with her husband and my oldest grandson, who just turned 16 on Christmas Eve. But I would venture to guess that most of you do not know that I didn't raise my daughter.

Forty years ago, I gave birth to my daughter Gena. But the circumstances were such that I couldn't bring her home to raise her. Although we have now been married for 34 years, her father and I weren't married at the time and we put her up for adoption, hoping that she would have a better life than we could provide for her at that time. I had faith that God would watch over her, and it was my fervent prayer that one day I would see her again. I believed that God would fulfill the promise that had been "interrupted".

As my life journey continued, my childhood dream of a husband, a home and a family was played out. Frank and I eventually married, gave birth to and raised our two sons, and live in a lovely home. We went about a "normal" existence, we went to work, the kids went to school and played baseball, we volunteered for youth activities and charitable organizations. Over the years I came to understand that God played a much larger role in my life than I had previously acknowledged. As a child, I had been taught to pray to God for things I wanted or thought I needed. As a wife and mother, I found myself doing a lot more listening for God's answers, and checking in to see if I was actually working *with* God, rather than *for* God.

When at the age of 17 my son David told me his girlfriend was pregnant, I felt that God was sending me down one of those unexpected labyrinth turns. Why would God revisit the sins of the mother on the son? His life would no longer be smooth sailing, as I had

wished for him. But when I saw David looking at his firstborn son and when I held Josiah in my arms, God's answer came through to me and stilled all my uncertainties.

And my prayers for my daughter continued. I kept listening and hoping, waiting for that promise kept deep in my heart to come to fruition, and watching for God's work in my life.

Eleven years ago my prayer was answered. My husband and I were serendipitously offered the chance to meet the daughter who had been missing from our lives since her birth. We were reunited through the combined efforts of the Maury Povich show and an organization called Big Hugs. Frank and I were flown to New York City to tell our story as part of a segment entitled "Home for the Holidays," which featured several families being reunited with siblings or children who had been adopted out as infants or young children. We had been told we would meet our daughter there, but she didn't know that we would be there. Standing backstage and listening to Gena tell her story, I realized in my heart that God was actually fulfilling the promise made 29 years earlier. Holding her and my 5-year-old grandson in my arms for the first time felt like God's glory come to life, and it gave me a new promise, as a witness to God's handiwork in my life. And that handiwork has been awesome!

We learned that Gena had lived most of her life in Northern California, but her life had been less than idyllic: Her adoptive parents divorced when Gena was 3, her mother died of cancer when Gena was 13, and she and her adopted sister sort of bounced from one family member to another until they were old enough to live on their own. But Gena will tell you that she truly values her life experiences, because they served to make her into the person she is today—a beautifully real, warm, vivacious human being.

For several years prior to our meeting, Gena had been searching for information about her birth parents. She, too, had been waiting for a promise to be fulfilled. She knew that God was at work in her life, but had decided that God needed a little help to bring her an answer. She was actively registered with several organizations and search sites. And like Simeon and Anna, she kept praying, and listening, and hoping, for the fulfillment of God's promise to her.

Since that first meeting, we have established a close relationship, celebrating the blessings bestowed upon us. Without a doubt, as the words of Isaiah remind us, God's glory has been shining brightly for us. Sometimes the dark turns of the labyrinth make it hard for us to see it clearly, but, as in our scripture reading today, the promise will be fulfilled in God's time.

So, I can identify with Simeon and Anna, who rejoiced after generations of waiting for the accomplishment of God's promise to be revealed, who were so thankful for seeing firsthand God's faithfulness. I have found that whether God's glory is just around the next turn, or down the twisty path, or even at the very center, the promise and the fulfillment are in the journey.

Reflection 3: Congregation

The ancient scriptures can be more than just stories for us. They offer an opportunity to see how God is or can be working in our own lives.

For the next few minutes we encourage you to reflect silently on how today's reading might have a deeper meaning for you.

A blank page is included in today's bulletin for those who would like to jot down a few notes.

To prompt your reflection, I'll offer a few questions to get you started:

Have you waited for a promise to be fulfilled?

Has God's promise been fulfilled for you?

Are you open to God's answers?

Take a look around, and within, with fresh eyes, and maybe take another look at what you believe God's promise is. Ponder the question: where have you met God in your labyrinth journey?