

“The Christmas We Weren’t Expecting” // Luke 2:22–38 // *In Step* #5

Introduction: Joshua Bell is perhaps the world’s most famous violinist; at 39 he was called “America’s greatest classical musician”--the kind that people would fill up Carnegie Hall at a minimum \$100/ticket just to hear him play his Stradivarius violin.

In **2007 a news outlet put him up to an experiment**. He was in DC for a concert, and so the day after they had him go down anonymously into the L’Enfant Metro station in DC during rush hour, his \$3.5 million Stradivarius in hand, and he played for an hour with his hat out to collect tips. **Keep in mind, thousands of people** had just paid hundreds of dollars a ticket to hear this guy play the night before. **Over the 43 minutes** he stood there playing Bach and Brahms in the station, no more than 6 people stopped, and he made a grand total of \$32.17 in donations, not counting one \$20 tip from one person right at the end who actually recognized him.¹

It’s possible to miss some of the greatest things in your life because your heart is not tuned to look for them. Sometimes our hearts are so dull and so distracted that we don’t recognize majesty even when it’s right in front of us.

If there were a theme for Luke’s rendition of the Christmas story, I think this would be it. **Luke 2 if you have your Bible.** We have been working our way around the Gospel of Luke for a while, and so for the next few weeks we’re going to look at what Luke says about the first Christmas.

While you are turning there, let me tell you about something you will be getting today for free as you leave. It’s a new little book I published with *The Good Book Company* called ***Searching for Christmas***. It’s short; a pretty easy read; light, accessible, hopefully humorous in places. The kind of thing you could put in a stocking, I’d say.

It’s an evangelistic exploration of the meaning of Christmas that takes a look at the names given to Jesus at his birth. The best way to learn who Jesus is is to look at the names that God gave to him.

I wrote this book thinking about you giving it to someone--perhaps your one--to start a conversation. Listen, **some people may not feel comfortable coming to our Christmas services** in person this year, but you can give them one of these and read it with them. Anyway, it’s our gift to you, and I hope you’ll stop by the table we have set up on the way out; **TAKE TWO, AND** give one to someone you’re reaching out to--tell them you’ll read it together with them.

¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/pearls-before-breakfast-can-one-of-the-nations-great-musicians-cut-through-the-fog-of-a-dc-rush-hour-lets-find-out/2014/09/23/8a6d46da-4331-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html; <https://www.classicfm.com/artists/joshua-bell/guides/busking-subway/>

Works consulted:

Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Luke, commentary, Thabiti M. Anyabwile

“He Is ... Here,” sermon, Joby Martin

“Testimonies to the Incarnation,” sermon, John MacArthur

“Looking for the Consolation of Israel,” sermon John Piper

If you need extra copies, you can order them on Amazon. Or, you can even download it for free! Just go to our website and you'll see a [link](#).²

Back to Luke 2. One of the big themes in Luke's Gospel is that the first Christmas came and went with most people unaware that anything had even happened.

Have you ever **gotten an unexpected or unwanted gift**? Think about it: *What's the worst gift you've ever gotten?* One of our missionaries said that she received a gift from one of her new friends in her new country and when she opened it up it was a local variety of candy: **BEEF-flavored candy**. I'm sure it's hard to hide your disappointment in the face of something like that.

I remember one year one of my relatives--the kind of relative you could always count on for a nice gift, the *good* aunt or uncle--that year they gave me a belt. I'm sure it was a nice belt, and I'm sure that my mom had told them I needed a belt, but still, it was a belt. I had opened the package so expectantly, so excitedly, and I literally had to fight back tears when I saw what it was. This was last year. Just kidding. I was like 10.

God's gift to us at Christmas was unexpected, but if you knew what you were looking for, and you recognized majesty when you saw it, it wasn't disappointing.

Luke 2:22–38 22 And when the days of their purification (i.e. Joseph and Mary's) according to the law of Moses were finished, they brought him [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (just as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord") 24 and to offer a sacrifice (according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons").

- In **Leviticus 12**, God commanded each Israelite family to dedicate their firstborn to God by means of an offering. That was because **in the Exodus, God had spared the lives** of all Israel's firstborn sons if they put the blood of a Lamb on their doorposts. **When the death angel saw the blood of the lamb**, he passed over that house and spared their son. So when they gave birth to their firstborn, they were to travel to the Temple and offer a lamb to commemorate that.
- Now, this text says that Mary and Joseph offered two pigeons instead of a lamb, which is an important detail to note, because that was an exception made for exceptionally poor families. If a family could not afford a lamb, the Law said instead they could offer two pigeons or two turtledoves or a partridge in a pear tree or whatnot.

What that shows you is that Jesus was not just born middle class, he was born poor. And I want you to let that sink in for a minute. A pastor friend of mine, **Thabiti Anyabwile**, asks, **What does it mean that Jesus was born into poverty? It means:** **1.** That poverty is not a sin and is not shameful in itself. **2.** That poverty is not a sign of God's disapproval. **3.** That poverty does not prevent a person from worshipping God. (*God made the provision for poor people. The point is: Even poor people can offer their first and best to God.*) **4.** Poverty now

² www.thegoodbook.com/free-ebook

does not necessarily doom a person to poverty forever. Jesus' life certainly took a turn. And **5**. It means that poverty is a cross that God entrusts to some of us for a season and we can be faithful in it.³

- Listen, if you're poor, or feel downtrodden, don't feel second class. Jesus identified with you *first*. God has a plan *for you*, where you are, and that plan can turn out very well indeed.

So, we see that Jesus was born poor. But what happens next is totally unexpected: **25** There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to Israel's consolation, and the Holy Spirit was on him. **26** It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he saw the Lord's Messiah. **27** Guided by the Spirit, he entered the temple. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform for him what was customary under the law, **28** Simeon took him up in his arms, praised God, and said,

29 Now, Master, you can dismiss your servant in peace, as you promised.

30 For my eyes have seen your salvation.

31 You have prepared it in the presence of all peoples—

32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel.

Now, this is crazy, isn't it? Mary and Joseph are there with hundreds of other moms and dads presenting their babies, and an old guy suddenly runs up to them, grabs their baby, and starts singing. Mary and Joseph are like, "Hey, hey, respect the distancing, please! You at least gotta sanitize before you do that." I mean, old ladies do this sort of thing all the time: pinching babies without asking permission and saying weird things like, "I could just eat you up!" But old men typically don't do this.⁴

Which leads to another important detail in this story: Luke says it was the Spirit of God that gave Simeon this insight. Listen: **That's the only way anybody accurately recognizes Jesus**. The irony here in this story is that all these rituals Israelites were going through at the Temple were supposed to prepare them to recognize the Messiah when he came. The irony is that those Israelites *most steeped* in the rituals were the last in line to recognize him!

And I think there's an important lesson here for you: **keeping rituals and traditions are great**, but more often than not they *keep* you from seeing Jesus. Think about it: **How many of you have already started just going through the motions this season?**

- **You bought the tree the day after Thanksgiving?** (how many of you are fake tree people? How many of you destroy the environment and cut down a real tree?) You got the tree.
- **You listen to the neverending Christmas music on K-love?** You watch all the Hallmark movies about the big city lawyer girl who comes home and falls in love with the tractor-driving-high-school-dropout-who-looks-like-Matthew-McConaughey guy. You've set up the stockings and the Manger scenes and even the heretical elf-on-the-shelf that teaches your kids to be little Pharisees.

³ Anyabwile, Thabiti. Exalting Jesus in Luke (Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition

⁴ From Joby Martin's sermon, "He Is... Here"

- **Maybe you're even doing some Advent readings.** But there is very little reflection on or wonder over Jesus.

You need the Spirit of God to open your eyes to the majesty of Jesus. So let me urge you to pray that over yourselves this season. Pray it for your family as you go through your Advent traditions. Pray it for those to whom you give the book S4C. **The good news is that this is the Spirit's mission on earth:** it's why he came, John 16: to help people recognize Jesus, but you have to ask for his help. He gives the Spirit without measure to all those and only those who ask.

33 His (Jesus') father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and told his mother Mary, "Indeed, this child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed—35 and a sword will pierce your own soul—that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

We'll come back to that.

36 There was also a prophetess, Anna, a daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was well along in years, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 and was a widow for eighty-four years. She did not leave the temple, serving God night and day with fasting and prayers. 38 At that very moment, she came up and began to thank God and to speak about him to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

OK, two people who have something in common. They are both old, and they are both hanging around the Temple, waiting, longing for something.

- **First, we have Simeon, whom the text says was waiting for "the consolation (*comfort, the relief*) of Israel."**
 - For most Jews, that pointed to political deliverance. For nearly 700 years, Israel had been subject to oppression by foreign powers. It had started with the exiles to Assyria and Babylon; but after that came subjugation by the Persians, the Greeks, and then the Romans, under whose rule they were now, and who were the worst of all of them. And **even when the Jews were in their homeland under self-rule**, their kingdom did not have near the glory it had once had under King David or King Solomon. So **Israel was waiting**--for deliverance, for justice, for restoration to promised glory. Simeon, being old, represents that posture of long waiting.
- And then we have Anna, whom it tells us has been a **widow for 84-years** after being married for 7.
 - It's safe to say that no girl of 16 dreams of her life turning out this way--being married for 7 years, having your husband die and then living for 84 years alone. **Especially in those days.** Widows usually had little way of providing for themselves, which meant they were often lonely, poor, and with no one to take care of them. I think we can say she represents someone for whom life has turned out very differently than she expected or hoped. Hers is not so much a yearning for political deliverance; she yearns for personal relief, personal comfort.

Let me make a couple of important observations:

1. Waiting is a key component of the Christian life.

- There's a reason Luke brings these two characters into this story. It's to show that Jesus comes to those who wait. And there is a reason they are both old. That shows they've been waiting a long time.
- Sometimes we talk about the Christian life as if it is instant fulfillment, immediate answers to prayer requests--if you do A, God will give B. But that is just not always true.
- Many of you find yourself in a posture of waiting this Christmas. A time that feels dark. A time of confusion. Maybe you even feel abandoned.
- It's a season of longing: longing for something to be set right. Injustice seems to reign all around you; maybe you yourself have been the victim of it.
- Maybe you, like Anna, are yearning for some need to be fulfilled. Life just hasn't turned out the way you'd always expected.
 - Maybe it is a longing to have your family put back together
 - Or, maybe to have a family of your own. You were hoping to be married by this Christmas but another Christmas is here and you're single.
- Maybe you are grieving the death of a child
- Maybe you are grieving a miscarriage this year.
- Maybe you're STILL waiting on a prodigal who has yet to come home
- I don't know.
- **And here's the thing:** you've tried everything you know how to try. You've gotten advice and prayed and believed and worked hard but still, things haven't gotten better.

Simeon and Anna's stories show you that God sees you--he hasn't forgotten you. And that waiting doesn't mean you are doing something wrong. Waiting is an essential part of the Christian life.

- Lamentations says, "The Lord is good to those who wait for him." (Lam 3:25)
- The prophet Isaiah says, "...blessed are all those who wait for him." (Isaiah 30:18)
- and, "...those that wait for me shall not be put to shame." (Isaiah 49:23)
- God will not disappoint those of you who wait for him. He will not let you be put to shame. **No one who ever has waited on God** has ever been let down. No one. Not even one. You won't be the first.

Waiting is an essential, even appointed, part of the Christian life. And that's what we're reminded of at Christmas. I love how **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** said it:

"The Advent season is a season of waiting, but our whole life is an Advent season, that is, a season of waiting for the last Advent, for the time when there will be a new heaven and a new earth." – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God Is in the Manger*

Christmas reminds us that while we have a lot to be thankful for, a lot of us are waiting. We're all waiting for the second coming of Christ, for the new heaven and the new earth; for Jesus to come and make things right and for all the sad things in our lives to come untrue.

Whether you have a specific need or just a yearning for heaven, **Simeon and Anna** show you that God hasn't forgotten you. The joy and the comfort of Christmas is for you. Which leads me to #2.

2. God's answer did not match their expectations.

I think it's safe to say that neither Simeon nor Anna was thinking that a helpless baby born to a poor family was God's answer to their longing. **But he was.**

- You see, what **Israel thought they needed from God was different from what they needed MOST.**
- What they thought they needed most was political deliverance, or a new husband and restored fortunes. But what they **MOST needed** was restoration with God. This is eternal life, Jesus said in John 17, the abundant life, fullness of joy, to know and walk with the Father.
- **We may think that what we most need** is physical health or financial assistance or family reunion but what we most need, deep in our souls, is reunion with our heavenly Father.
 - **You see, you and I were created for God.** Whether we know it or not.
 - **Blaise Pascal--a great Christian philosopher--famously said** that the human heart has a gigantic hole in it... **That hole is not filled by money.** It's not filled by romantic love. It's not filled by family, job success, or political peace and prosperity. **It's filled by Jesus.**
 - That's why **St. Augustine said:** "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."
- **You were created for God;** you need to be restored to him, and only this Messiah, the Christ, born as a baby to live the life you were supposed to live and then die the death you were condemned to die, in your place, can fill that hole.
 - The **arms you searched for** in romance were his arms.
 - **The security you've looked for in money** is found in his presence and promises.
 - The **significance you've craved** in the approval others--from your parents, from your spouse, from likes on a Facebook post--that's found in hearing him say, "You are my beloved son or daughter, in whom I am well pleased."

I want to be clear: God is good, and we are supposed to ask for that goodness to break into our lives and our families.

- We can and should pray for physical healing and an end to our loneliness and political help. **But first and foremost Jesus came to lead us into fellowship with the Father--because, again, that is eternal life**, that is fullness of joy; that is life abundantly; and apart from that, any other fix would only be superficial anyway.

What God did was unexpected, but it was exactly what they needed. Can I ask: Are you ready for God to do the unexpected in your life this Christmas? I don't care how spiritually mature you are or how much you feel certain that you know what you need most from God--sometimes you have to be ready for God to do the unexpected in your life. If there is no room in your heart for God to surprise you, maybe it's not God you are worshipping. Ever think about that?

If you're going to really come to God, there has to be room in your heart for him to surprise you, to do the unexpected. Sometimes the greatest love God shows is not in fixing our problems, but when he uses our problems to open our eyes to see the treasure we have in him. And sometimes that comes through pain. Think about it:

- How does a surgeon bring "peace" to your body if it has a tumor in it? He cuts you. He has to take the tumor out.
- How does a therapist bring "peace" to a downcast, depressed person? Often by dredging up the past, getting you to remember and confront painful memories. **Often, you have to feel worse before you can feel better.**⁵

It's the same thing with spiritual healing. Sometimes the paths toward peace lead us through valleys of pain.

It's like we often say here TSC: Sometimes God answers our prayers by giving us what we would have asked for if we knew what he knew.⁶ And what he knows is that the deepest longings of your heart and the peace you are looking for are found in the knowledge of him.

Conclusion (MUSIC)

Simeon said 2 things there at the end I want us to close with:

- **First, Vs. 29, "I can depart in peace..."**
 - Having had the Spirit of God open his eyes, he could depart in peace. **Note: Nothing had changed about his circumstances.** Israel was still under Rome's rule. He would still be a victim of injustice. But he was at peace.
 - And nothing had changed with Anna's circumstances either. She was still a widow. Yet she was at peace.
 - **My question: Can you be at peace today?** What do you require in order for you to depart this weekend in peace? A change in circumstances? Resolution of some injustice? Some kind of personal vindication? A husband? Your kids coming to faith?
 - Imagine this ring of keys as the "**keys to peace in your heart.**" Some of you take these keys and hand them out to everyone around you. *My wife gets a key, my kids get a key, my boss gets a key, my girlfriend or boyfriend, my stock broker, the school I am trying to get into.* And then you step back and tell everyone that they better treat you the way you want to be treated because they've got the keys to your peace.
 - That's not a good plan for two reasons. **1. They will let you down.** Guaranteed. And you can't even be that mad at them when they do, because, guess what? You have probably let them down, too. **Here's how I know that:** You've let yourself down. No one has let you down, lied to, and disappointed you more than you. Every morning when I look in the mirror I am looking at the person who has let J.D. Greear down most. I'm looking at the person who has lied to J.D. Greear

⁵ Tim Keller, *Hidden Christmas*, 116–28.

⁶ I first heard this from Tim Keller

most. So if I've let me down, I can't be surprised when others do, too. So it's silly to give them the keys to my peace.⁷

- **Only Jesus** should hold the key to your peace. **Only he is faithful with it. Only he can guarantee it.**
- **That's what Simeon and Anna do here.** They saw that Jesus held the key to their peace and once they saw Jesus, they entrusted themselves to him, and then they could depart in peace.
- Is he, and he alone, the keeper of your peace today?
- Second thing he says, **Vs. 34: "This child is destined to cause the fall and rise of many..."**
- Simeon said, "This baby boy is bringing a dividing line."
 - **Vs. 35**, Simeon said, **he'll cause offense.** Because of him, Simeon said, "The **thoughts of a lot of hearts** are going to be exposed." Because of his claims, the truth about them will be revealed.
 - This baby is going to grow up to preach that none of us are good enough to go to heaven--and he's going to have to give us that as a gift. And we're going to have to receive that humbly like beggars. Jesus did not come so that you could be a better person, he came because you can't be a better person and you'd have to depend on him and him alone to save you. And a lot of people aren't going to like that because it's going to attack their pride.
 - And he's going to demand absolute Lordship from us, and a lot of people won't like that either because while they have no problem with religion, they want to retain control of their lives. They want to keep their hands on the reins.
 - And he's going to insist that more than we need fixes to our problems we need him, and a lot of people aren't going to be satisfied with that, and it's going to reveal that a lot of people aren't as interested in God as they are in what they think God can do for them.
- **This baby boy will bring a dividing line, and all of us are going to be challenged.** Even Mary! See what Simeon said to her in **vs. 35**, "a sword will pierce your soul also!"
 - Few people in the Bible are presented to us as admirably and attractively as Mary, right? Yet even she didn't get it completely right. She was seriously mistaken at first as to what her son was about and more than once she tried to stop him. Mark 3:31 said that Jesus' "mother and brothers" found his claims and ministry to be, literally, insanity. Vs. 21 says they tried to bring him home by force, because they thought he was "out of his mind."⁸ So, Jesus' claims would challenge even Mary!
- That means you should expect he'll challenge you, too. In fact, I'd say that **one of the signs that you've really encountered Jesus is that you've wrestled with him.** Really giving yourself to Jesus will feel, in some ways, like a sword in your soul challenging your pride, your control of your life, and your idols. If you've never wrestled with his deep challenge, you probably have never grappled with him.
- **This baby boy will draw a dividing line**, and that dividing line will separate people for eternity! **John 3: He who believes on the Son will have everlasting life and will belong to God for eternity, and those who don't will perish without him.** **The most important question you'll ever consider: What side of that dividing line are you on?** Have you surrendered to him, and given yourself to him, or are you still without him?

⁷ Illustration on keys from Joby Martin's "He Is... Here" sermon

⁸ Tim Keller, *Hidden Christmas*, 116–28.

- **Illus.** My kids and I at the airport recently: Every time they say when we walk past the TSA exit line: “Dad, do you remember that time you made the security alarm go off?” ...

Which side of that dividing line are you on? Listen: Jesus did not come so that you could be a better person, he came because you can't be a better person. **Only he can save you**, and you're going to have to lay down your life at his feet to receive that.

And **having received him**, can you go out from here at peace?

Bow your heads...

- Receive him
- Can you say, “I can depart in peace”? Ask God to open your eyes to how rich a treasure you possess...

