

Series: Stretched by Jesus

“Stretched by the Light”

Introduction: If you had a chance to look at the “From Your Pastor” message this past week, you know that we have entered, in the church calendar, the season called Epiphany. While we don’t use it all that often, epiphany is not an unfamiliar word. It describes a moment of piercing awareness, or the sudden jolt of understanding or clarity. “Ah-ha” would be a good synonym! I suggested that if you were to take that moment of awareness or understanding and stretch it out over a period of time, you would begin to grasp what epiphany is all about (*Seeking God's Face: Praying with the Bible through the Year*, 107). For it's about coming to a deeper awareness and understanding of this Jesus whose birth we have just celebrated.

Epiphany follows the 12 days of Christmas and always begins on January 6 with the celebration of the arrival of the Kings or Magi as they are known. The worship of the Christ Child by these somewhat odd, foreign figures signals the universal scope of Christ’s mission. It was a scope which, as we will hear in our reading this morning, began to stretch the minds and hearts of many. In fact, Epiphany as a whole, as it focuses our attention on the remarkable and unique person that is Jesus, can be a very stretching time.

Coming off the months we have just spent in the book of Judges, where we saw God’s continued and unrelenting faithfulness to his people and his purposes in the midst of and despite the chaos of the world, a world that could find no king fit to rule, epiphany moves us to ask: Who is this King who has finally come, and who we declare is God in the flesh? What is he really like? How has he come to rule? What does he expect of us? Where and how does he stretch us? What moves us to marvel? How does his love amaze, or challenge us? What additional understanding and/or awareness of him do we seek? [

I. A Divine Choreography

A. Our passage in Luke is, ultimately, about revelation, about an increased awareness and understanding; it’s about epiphany. The five people we meet in this passage – Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Simeon, and Anna, are brought together by God for this epiphany, in the Temple in Jerusalem, in a kind of divine choreography. In this “dance,” we see God leading through his word (the Law of Moses – v. 22; the Law of the Lord – v. 39) and his Spirit, to which the participants faithfully respond. This enables them to begin to really see, even as it stretches them.

B. Mary and Joseph enter the dance as they respond to the word of the Lord by having their son circumcised on the 8th day of his life, according to the Law God had given his people through Moses, and then naming him according to the word they had heard from the angel. They continue to respond to the word of God as they faithfully followed the purity laws found in Leviticus, laws that called a woman who had just given birth to a son to go through a process of purification (40 days), and for parents to offer a sacrifice at the Temple, consecrating their firstborn male to the Lord (Lev. 12). As they made their way along the five-mile trek from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to do all of this, the picture we are given is of a reverent and devout couple, seeking to honor God in all that they do by living in obedience to his word.

C. At the Temple they “bump into” a man named Simeon, although it is clear that this is no accidental meeting. Simeon, we learn, is a wise elder. He is “righteous and devout,” words that describe his desire to honor God in all that he did. We also learn that he is waiting for the “consolation of Israel,”

meaning that he knows not all is right in the world, evidenced locally by the fact that Roman troops continue to patrol the streets and that a crazed ruler named Herod was wreaking havoc throughout the region. Finally, we are told that the Holy Spirit is with Simeon in a special way. Not only had the Spirit had made known to Simeon that he would see the One through whom God was going to make all things right—the Messiah—before he died, but that this One was in the courts of the temple, right now! And so, moved by this Spirit, that's where Simeon met Mary, Joseph and Jesus offering their sacrifice.

D. "At that very moment," writes Luke, they were joined in this dance by a wise, elderly woman named Anna. She had known much heartache in her life, including the death of her husband at a very young age, after only seven years of marriage. Like Simeon, Anna been longing for God to make things right in the world—the "redemption of Jerusalem" is how Luke describes it. She, too, was righteous and devout, as seen in her habit of coming regularly to the Temple and engaging in a ministry of intercession through the practices of fasting and prayer. When she saw the child and heard Simeon's praise song, she gave thanks to God and began to share what she had heard with whoever would listen! So, what had she heard Simeon sing?

II. Simeon's Song (vv. 29-32)

A. Simply, Simeon celebrated, as he took the child in his arms (and what a moment that must've been for him!) that he was looking right into the eyes of God's salvation, of God's anointed deliverer. What's more, this deliverer had come to rescue people of all nations, revealing the light of God's goodness even to foreigners—Gentiles. At the same time, the role Israel had played in having this blessing to the world come through her would be recognized. This good news about which Simeon sang would lead to several reactions.

B. First, this good news caused Mary and Joseph to pause, to marvel at what was being said about their child. And it wasn't the first time. Following the visit of the shepherds, who came looking for a baby in a manger that they had been told by the angel was the Savior, the Messiah, Mary was moved to ponder (Lk. 2:19). And it wouldn't be the last time either. Twelve years later, when Jesus had stayed behind in Jerusalem to be with his Father (and he didn't meant Joseph), also caused her to ponder (Lk. 2:49-51). The dawning on her as to just who this son was who she had given birth to and was now raising had to hit her in progressive ways, I would imagine. At this point, 40 days in, Simeon's declaration that this Jesus had come for Gentile, as well as Jew, and making that declaration in the Temple, the center of Jewish life, was no small thing. It would actually stretch the Jewish followers of Jesus for quite some time as they wrestled with the implications for the church in this news, eventually coming to rest in the wideness of God's mercy.

C. Second, this good news, as Simeon went on to explain, would not be considered good by all. Some would rise and some would fall. Although Simeon celebrates in his song that the scope of the mission of Jesus was universal, he would not be universally supported. Conflict was ahead. Hearts would be exposed. Given who he would claim to be and who he would call his followers to become, one could not respond to Jesus by sitting on the fence. You couldn't really sort of half-way follow him. You were either all in, or not. Those who did not support him, who found themselves being stretched beyond their breaking point, would eventually put him to death, an event that Simeon warned would, among other heartaches, pierce his mother's very soul.

III. Seeing Jesus Clearly

A. It's worth stepping back and noticing that out of all the people the streets of Jerusalem were teeming with in those days—the rich, the powerful, the young, the religious—the ones who God chose to reveal his light to and the ones who began to see Jesus and the scope of his mission clearly, were a dirty and relatively rough people called shepherds, a strange group of foreign astrologers, and a couple of senior citizens who are far past what is considered to be the prime of life. God obviously placed great value on each of these groups of people and didn't for a moment think that he was wasting the Holy Spirit on them. Further, each of these groups were those who faithfully responded to the leading of God's word and/or God's Spirit, and enjoyed a closer walk with God because of it.

B. I think in particular of the peace that Simeon experienced from being assured of the arrival of God's promised Messiah. It didn't mean his circumstances would immediately change, but it meant that God had fulfilled his promises and would be continuing to fulfill them, ultimately making all things new. God was now with Simeon, whatever his circumstances.

In this vein, I was encouraged earlier in the week by a text in the *Daily Office* from God's word to Joshua. After the death of Moses, Joshua had been appointed by God to lead his people to the Promised Land. It was a huge task that lay ahead of him. God encouraged him through his word and his presence:

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful . . . Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. [Josh. 1:8-9]

C. We have the same word, in a much fuller and more fulfilled form, than either Joshua, or Simeon, to guide us on our journey to the Promised Land. The life, death, resurrection, and ascension are all now available for us to ponder, and the gift of the Spirit that flowed out of the ascension is also available to all. Luke actually begins his account of Jesus by telling us that he has written it in an orderly fashion for us to learn from and take confidence in. As we consider the life of Jesus in this season, may we be confident that God is with us. May we be alert to the nudges and whispers of the Holy Spirit. May we pay attention to who God pays attention to. And may we allow ourselves to be stretched!