

Living on tiptoe: Luke 2:22-40; Psalm 148

## **Waiting and fidelity are closely connected.**

by [Christine D. Pohl](#) in the [December 27, 2005](#) issue

In a culture that has made efficiency a moral requirement and credit-card purchasing a way of life, delays are frustrating. Instant messaging, fast food meals and express deliveries reinforce a sense that waiting for almost anything is a waste of our time and a poor use of our gifts and resources. Orienting our lives around long-term commitments seems particularly risky and unnecessarily constraining. Accounts of fidelity under challenging circumstances puzzle us nearly as often as they inspire us.

In this context, it is difficult to make sense of the stories of Simeon and Anna in Luke 2. They seem so foreign to contemporary notions of lives well lived. Two people, at this point quite elderly, have spent inordinate amounts of time waiting, faithfully looking for the fulfillment of a single promise.

Anna's life choices seem particularly constrained. An entire adult life spent in prayer and fasting in the temple may have equipped her for high status in the ancient world, but to us such choices are nearly incomprehensible. Such a small scope for a life, so little productive activity—how did she develop her gifts? Simeon fares a little better—the text mentions three times that the Holy Spirit was at work—but he too spent his life looking to the future.

Waiting and fidelity are closely connected, and many of us struggle with both. Lured by the promise of freedom and infinite choice, we are fearful of foreclosing our options and limiting our opportunities. Why make commitments to something in the future, when better opportunities might surface in the meantime? Why live in a way that anticipates a future when the present includes so many other possibilities? What promise could possibly be so life-giving that we would shape our lives around it?

Simeon and Anna were symbols of Israelite faithfulness and righteous aging. They trusted that fidelity would bear fruit, and they trusted for a very long time. After the

joyful testimony of the angels and shepherds at the birth of Jesus, it is Simeon and Anna who recognize him as the promised one. They had watched and waited for the Lord's Messiah, and one day they met him.

Simeon cradled the consolation of Israel in his arms. Satisfied to have seen the evidence of God's salvation in his lifetime, Simeon announced that he was now ready to die in peace. He had waited and the promise had been fulfilled. He praised God and proclaimed that the good news was for the whole world, then spoke complicated words of blessing over the baby and his parents. At the same time, Anna's decades of daily worship, her continual prayer and fasting, led her to burst into praise and testimony when she encountered the child. The text says that this woman "of a great age" spoke about him to many other people who also "were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

After years of waiting, Simeon and Anna were there, in the right place at the right time, to see God's promise fulfilled. Sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, Simeon was ready to welcome God's anointed one. Shaped by a lifetime of being present to God in worship, Anna recognized that the promise had arrived in the form of an infant being presented in the temple.

A posture of hope and fidelity structured their lives. They were righteous, devout and profoundly shaped by a story that was yet to be completed. The years of anticipation, waiting and looking were not wasted time, but time infused and transformed by intimations of the promise.

Simeon's words to Mary anticipate some of the complexity and costliness of the promise, but it is highly unlikely that he or Anna lived to see Jesus' adult ministry. Living on the other side of Jesus' death and resurrection, we have a more complete understanding of the story than Simeon or Anna could have had, and the story turned out to be both harder and more wonderful than they could have imagined. But what they knew shaped their lives and prepared them for a joyful, face-to-face encounter with the Messiah.

In the end, however, this is a story not so much about Simeon and Anna as about God's fulfillment of a promise to provide a way of salvation. The praise with which Simeon and Anna respond to the fulfillment of God's promise is a human articulation within a choir of praise that comes from all creation. Psalm 148 describes the praise offered to the Lord from the heavens, the angels, the sun and stars. Snowflakes and

frost, apple trees and house finches join the chorus. And praise comes from people, old and young, powerful and ordinary, for God has truly provided a way.

Though often overlooked, the testimony of a life lived faithfully over a long time is a gift to every congregation. A leader in the church I attend is named Anna. Well into her 80s, she spends much of each week in prayer and Bible study. She lives on tiptoe, looking for signs of renewal in the church, joyfully reporting every evidence of God's work in the world. To me she seems like a contemporary incarnation of the biblical Anna, for whom anticipation and hope, expectation and worship are a way of life.

Simeon and the Annas invite reflection on whether what we know of the story of God's redemption shapes our lives in ways that keep us open and attentive to God's presence and present work. Perhaps it isn't a foolish waste of time to order our lives according to a story that is not yet complete. Perhaps living according to the promise of God locates us where we are most likely to regularly encounter the One who is life, fulfillment and freedom.