

Holding promise: Luke 2:22-40

by [John K. Stendahl](#) in the [December 4, 2002](#) issue

Picture the old man with the baby in his arms. He stands chuckling with giddy joy, or perhaps he gazes with streaming tears on his cheeks, or is lost in transfixed wonder; in whatever way, he is so very happy. Then he says that this is enough now, he is ready to die. He has seen salvation and he can depart in peace.

But what has he seen, really? It's just a little child in his arms, a powerless, speechless newcomer to the world. Whatever salvation this baby might work is still only a promise and a hope; whatever teaching he might offer will remain hidden for many years. Nothing has happened yet. Herod still sits on his throne and Caesar governs from afar. The world looks as it did before.

But Simeon stands there in grateful wonder. It is the future he holds in his hands. He has seen and touched it. He is satisfied. It is, as he said, enough. And then Anna, also old and approaching the end of her days, adds her own joy and praise to the moment. She'll be telling everybody about this baby whom she saw for just a few minutes.

By the time a mature Jesus comes onto the stage of history, Simeon and Anna will be long dead. So will most of those shepherds who came to see the child in the manger, and possibly Joseph, who watched over him, and some or all of the magi who feature in the other nativity story. Thirty years or more will pass before the gospel story recommences in the ministry of Jesus. In the meantime they who saw the baby, knelt at the stable or laid their tributes before him would not know what became of him. They would know only what they had heard and seen back then.

Though some might take this aspect of the stories as no more than an accidental effect of nativity prologues for the Gospels, it seems to me to offer us both connection and encouragement. We too are people who have seen something but not its full unfolding. Paradoxically, Simeon and Anna do not so much belong to the gospel's prehistory as they are paradigmatic for our own experience of that gospel.

What we have, in a sense, is hardly more than they had. We have the scriptures that school us in hope and attentiveness. We have stories and covenants and signs. We

have moments, or the memory of moments, when the tender compassion of our God has come close enough to see and feel. We have something like the shepherds would have had, recalling all their lives a night of mysterious glory, or like what the magi brought back to their homelands, a vision of a different kind of king and kingdom. Their eyes had seen the glory of Israel, the light for the nations.

We have that as well, though for us the world has resumed its accustomed form and, in the light of day, seems largely unsaved and unchanged.

We have also the children now briefly entrusted to our arms for blessing and who will, we hope, live on after us. We pray that their lives will be grand with wisdom and courage and that they will make the world better. As we get older, life becomes increasingly about them and less and less about us. When I hold a child in my arms, as Simeon cradled Jesus in his, my life seems literally recentered: not in myself but just in front of me there. It is around this present future, this vulnerable and miraculous little one, that my universe bends.

You may argue that we have much more than Simeon and the other prologue-dwellers did because we have the rest of the gospel story. We know what happened to the baby and understand more fully the pattern of his life. We know his teaching and the pattern of his passion and vindication. But note that Luke describes Simeon as fairly clued in on that score as well, telling Mary of the conflict and the sorrow that lay ahead. We have no significant advantage even there.

What we have is in these ways hardly more than what Simeon had. But what that is, is wonderful indeed. The canticle he prays has become for much of the church a song to follow the communion meal. We have now seen and tasted the promised future. We have held the Christ child. Taking bread and wine to our lips, we have kissed him and with words and songs we have caressed his presence. We may not get all the way to his future ourselves, not in this life—but we've seen it, and that's enough, we say. We can go in peace now.

But is it really enough? Are we not both ethically and spiritually called to dissatisfaction with such partiality? Should there not be more, and should not the blessing be made something present rather than just a memory of the past or a hope of heaven? Having tasted the kingdom's presence, we hunger and thirst the more for it. Having seen it, we strive to bring it home. Frustrated and yearning, we call for God no longer to tarry, to fulfill the promise, to give us today the bread of

tomorrow.

That's all true, but with that struggle and longing we may be the more grateful for the spirit of Simeon and for those times we find ourselves with him. His song has become a sort of Christian *Dayyenu*, that great Passover song which proclaims each little part of the salvation as sufficient and great enough. We may want more than this manna, but still our hearts lift in thanksgiving.

We have seen. It's enough for now.