

On Monday of this week, my little nephew Tucker, who is five years old lost his first tooth. Several of his friends who have lost teeth told him about the tooth fairy, and how they put their tooth under the pillow at night, and when they woke up, it was replaced with a quarter or dollar. No joke, my five year old nephew told his mom, “I want the tooth fairy to bring me an iPhone 13.” Inflation is a real thing! At least he knows what he wants. It’s one thing for a five year old to want a new phone, but as we get older there are things that we desire, things we want to acquire or experience, and that desire drives us! I have a friend who wants to finish an ironman, where you swim 2.4 miles, bike 112 miles, and then run a full marathon. Because that’s his goal, it is shaping the way he is spending his time. He is incredibly intentional about his sleeping and nutrition and workout regime. I have some friends who wanted to build a house, so for 7 years they lived on ½ their income so they could save up for the home they wanted. I know several people who want to be doctors, which means after finishing 12 years of regular school, they will go through roughly 12 more years of school and take out hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt. When there is something that we really want, when there is a goal or vision we are chasing, it’s like that thing, whatever it is, reaches down into our lives, grabs hold of us, and pulls us forward. Here’s one way of saying it: “Whatever captures your heart will shape your life.” Whatever consumes your focus will impact the way you live.

Keep that in mind and turn with me to Luke 2. Today, as we continue in our series on Luke together, we are going to look at two people, Simeon and Anna, whose hearts were entirely captured by the hope of seeing Jesus, and how that desire shaped their lives. As we read this passage we are going to learn about Jesus, how these two people’s lives were shaped by their longing to see Jesus, and how our lives can be shaped by that desire as well.

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses [*which would have been 40 days after Jesus’ birth*], Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.

Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:22-38)

We learn several things about Jesus as we read this passage. For example, we learn that Jesus lived in poverty. There is a lot of attention these days given to people's wealth. New record setting contracts are given to athletes every year. Max Scherzer just signed with the Mets to make 43 million dollars a year, the highest salary in baseball. Patrick Mahomes signed a 10 year deal with the Chiefs, paying him 50 million dollars a year. All this pales in comparison with Lionel Messi, who, over the last four years made 175 million a year playing soccer. That's the power of having a global sport! Athletes make a lot, but then you compare them to Microsoft founder Bill Gates who is worth 137 billion, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos who is worth 202 billion, Tesla and Space X leader Elon Musk who was just named Time's Person of the Year and is worth 305 billion dollars; most estimate him to be the wealthiest private citizen in the history of the world.

One would assume that if God was going to come into the world, and he wasn't just going to entertain the world like an athlete or lead new technological innovations for the world like a business owner but was going to give his life for the salvation of all humanity, he would have the greatest wealth imaginable. Raised in the finest private schools, he'd have the red carpet rolled out to him like the children of celebrities, a bodyguard like the kids of the president. This week, Kim Kardashian tweeted this photo (view online version of the sermon to see the photo) of her living room and said she's hired an Emmy award-winning pianist to come to her house every day of December and play Christmas songs on her grand piano so that her four children can wake up to the sound of live music. Maybe the Son of God would be expected to grow up in a house like that! Not Jesus. We know that he was born in a manger and laid in a feeding trough. The Scriptures required a gift of a lamb to be made when a baby was dedicated at the temple. But if the family was too poor, if they couldn't afford a single lamb, they could offer two birds that would cost about a quarter. That's what Jesus' family offered. Think about how truly ironic it is—the family who will raise the lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world doesn't have enough resources to buy a single lamb themselves.

It wasn't just at his birth. When Jesus got older, he was a day laborer, a working class carpenter or stonemason (the Greek word could refer to either profession). During his ministry, the Bible says he had no place to lay his head. No home. No Sealy Posturepedic mattress. He slept on the floor, often out in the open air. That's the king who has come to us! Not with the trappings of wealth, but humble, able to relate to every one of us. As we learn later in Scripture in 2 Corinthians 8:9, speaking of the incarnation: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." This is the sacrificial, self-giving love of God.

Jesus changes every life. Do you remember what Simeon told Jesus' parents? "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed" (2:34-35). This is his way of saying, "Jesus is not going to be a bland figure who comes to the world, does his thing, draws a little bit of notoriety, and dies, then everyone forgets about him and life gets back to normal." He's going to be a lightning rod! His arrival will change the tide in the history of the world. His birth will be the dividing line in how all humanity tells time. About 100 years ago, Dr. James Allen wrote this: "Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today Jesus is the central figure of the human race and the leader of mankind's progress." All the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that have ever reigned put together have not affected the life of mankind on earth as powerfully as that one solitary life. Jesus changes everything! When you come across Jesus, it's like hitting a T in the road. You have a decision to make. The decision about Jesus is the most important decision anyone will ever make. The decision about Jesus is what causes the rising and falling of everyone. It's not the decision

about where to go to college, what to do for a living, who to marry, how many kids to have, what city to live in—all those decisions are huge and have a cascading impact in your life, but no decision matters as much as the decision of what you will do with Jesus. In John 14:6 Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” There is no other person who has ever lived who can say something like that. In Acts 4:12 the Apostles said, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” No matter what else might be true of your life—age, gender, relationship status, vocation, bank account, hobbies, friends—everything ultimately hinges on how you respond to Jesus. And Simeon knew that Jesus would be that important the moment he saw this little baby, just six weeks old. Jesus changes everything!

One more thing to highlight about Jesus from this passage: Jesus came to give his life for the world. We know what it’s like when someone is brought to a place for a purpose. A new CEO is brought into a company to pioneer innovation and increase shareholder value. A new head coach is hired to turn a team around and restore a program to a winning tradition. Sometimes a person in their 60s or 70s, who has lived in the same city their entire life, lived in the same house for 40 or 50 years moves across the country, to a new town where they have no friends, just to be able to spend more time with kids and grandkids. We know what it’s like to make a big move with a specific purpose or outcome in mind. Jesus left heaven and came to earth to give his life for us. When Simeon saw Jesus, he said, “For my eyes have seen your salvation.” And then he looked at Mary and said, “A sword will pierce your own soul too.” He looked at Jesus and he knew Jesus was the way God was going to save the world. And then he looked at Mary and with tender compassion said, “This is going to hurt so bad.” Salvation was not to come through the path of least resistance. It would come through rejection and loss, betrayal and deceit, suffering and death. Mary, who brought this son to Jerusalem to dedicate to God, would one day, in that very city, watch as her son would be beaten and have a cross fastened to his back, and would then follow behind him, sobbing uncontrollably, as he was led to a place called Golgotha. She would stand there and witness her son as he was nailed to the cross, as he had a spear run through his side—unimaginable pain and grief for a mother. Jesus had come to save the world, but he’d save the world by dying for the world.

This was God’s plan. The prophet Isaiah, 700 years before Jesus, wrote these words: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:5-6). Jesus didn’t come from heaven to give us gifts—he came *as* the gift. He gave us *himself*. Jesus himself said in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” In Titus 2:14 we read, “(Jesus) gave himself for us to redeem us.” Jesus came to give his life for the world!

We learn all these things about Jesus in this brief look at his life as a baby. And we also learn about the two people, Simeon and Anna, who spent their entire lives waiting to see him. I want to focus on three aspects of their lives and use their lives as an example for us.

The first thing that stands out to me is that Simeon and Anna were deeply committed to God. As Luke is describing them, he uses these phrases: “He was righteous and devout.” “She worshiped night and day.” What incredible words to these individuals! We began the message by saying, “Whatever captures your heart will shape your life.” God had captured their hearts, so their lives were shaped around God and his priorities. They were deeply committed to God. Let me ask you: has your heart been captured by God in such a way that these words could describe you? Do you long be righteous in all you do? Are you devout? Not awkwardly religious in a way that is strange and offensive, but rather dedicated and deeply sincere in your faith? Do you have a continual posture of worship, where you are seeking an ongoing, continual conversation with the Lord night and day, where your life is surrendered to him and in your heart you are praising him? That’s how these two people lived their lives. It’s possible for all of us!

Some of you will be familiar with the name Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a monk from the 17th century. He lived in a monastery outside Paris, where his job, every day, was to wash the dishes for everyone who lived in or visited the monastery. It was a routine, monotonous job, but he learned during his cleaning to meet God while doing his daily tasks. He ultimately wrote one of the most influential books on prayer published in the last 2,000 years, called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. The premise of the book is simple: no matter where we are, no matter what we are doing, we can meet with God; we can have the sort of posture of worship and intimacy with God that Simeon and Anna had. In his book he said,

The most holy and necessary practice in our spiritual life is the presence of God. That means finding constant pleasure in His divine company, speaking humbly and lovingly with him in all seasons, at every moment, without limiting the conversation in any way. There's no greater lifestyle and no greater happiness than that of having a continual conversation with God...It is not necessary to have great things to do. I turn my omelet in the pan for God.

No one goes to sleep and wakes up the next day with that level of focus and dedication and intimacy with God, but if we are deeply committed to God and our hearts are captured by love for God, that sense of connection and devotion will become an increasingly dominant reality in our lives.

When God captures our heart, we will be deeply committed to him, just like Simeon and Anna. Another thing we see in these two: Simeon and Anna served God their entire lives. It's not like their level of dedication lasted for a few weeks in the wake of some euphoric high they had at a summer camp when they were young. It wasn't just the fleeting zeal of a teenager or a college student. Throughout their entire lives, from youth, to middle age, into their autumn years, they served the Lord. We don't know the exact age of Simeon, but we know that when he saw Jesus he said in 2:29 "You may now dismiss your servant in peace." He lived a full life; this was the only thing left in life he wanted to do. Luke says, "Anna was a widow until she was 84 years old." She became a widow earlier in her life, likely in her early to mid-twenties. She could have done a lot of things with her remaining years—remarried, started a family, pursued passions and interests and hobbies—but she decided, every day, for roughly 60 years, to go to the temple, to meet with the Lord, to pray and worship. Hers was a beautiful, lifelong commitment to God. I love that vision for maturity in life—not, "As I get older and move into retirement, I'll have more time to spend in warm weather, more time with the grandkids, more time for hobbies." And of course, all those things are wonderful. Warm weather and grandkids and hobbies are great, but the most important priority we can set in our later years is to serve God! Remember: whatever captures our hearts will shape the way we live. And if God has truly captured your heart, then no matter what stage of life you are in, you will serve him all your days!

I remember when I was 22 years old, I was serving in a church and developed a relationship with a couple who were in their retirement years. They shared with me that, just like they committed to giving God 10% of their money, ever since they were retired, they committed to giving God 10% of their time. They said there are 168 hours in a week. We round up to 170, we take 10% of that. And we prioritize spending at least 17 hours every week with our focus on God: reading his word, praying for people in need, serving our church and our community. I was sitting there as a 22 year old college student saying, "That's it! That's who I want to be in 50 years." They were a modern-day Simeon and Anna.

I want to take a moment to say thank you to the people in our church who have modeled an entire life of devotion. You are a great inspiration to me. I see the way you love and cherish God's word. I see how you worship with us in church every single week. I see how you commit to serving all week long—sometimes cleaning the church building, other times preparing communion, other times mentoring children at

Thomas Gregg School or at Lifebridge. You are making sure that as you finish the race, you finish strong. I want to thank you, I want to honor you. I want to say well done. You are an inspiration. Keep it up. I, and everyone else my age and younger at this church, need to see the example you are setting!

One more thing from this story: not only were these two deeply committed to God and not only did they serve God their entire lives, Simeon and Anna maintained a singular focus. With all the distractions and priorities that were vying for their attention and affection, they kept their focus on God. Their hearts were captured by God and what God wanted to do in the world, so they were able to easily say no to so many other distractions. Simeon was described as “waiting for the consolidation of Israel,” which means all his hope and focus was on seeing God’s Messiah. Luke describes Anna by saying she “never left the temple.” She wanted to be there to witness God’s work and the fulfillment of his promises. If you go to most kids right now and ask them what is on their Christmas list, they might give you a notepad with 20-30 things on it. At any time in their lives, if you went to Simeon and Anna and said, “What do you want from God?” they would say, “To see Jesus.” Let me ask you an introspective question: how singular is your focus right now? Are you giving a ton of mental energy and bandwidth right now to work and finances, family and friends, Christmas shopping and holiday activities? How focused are you on Jesus?

In my devotions this week I was reading in Matthew 6, where Jesus says: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” The eye is the part of our body we use not just to look at things, but to decide what is beautiful, what is worthy of our attention and focus. Follow someone’s eyes and you’ll be able to find out what they want. Jesus is saying, “If your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light.” If you decide to focus on the right thing—Christ and his kingdom—your life will be filled with light. But look, if the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness. If our focus is on the wrong place, darkness takes over.

This week I saw an incredible example of what it looks like to keep our focus on Jesus. Nine days ago, a series of deadly tornadoes swept through several states, with the hardest hit area being Kentucky. Take a look at this scene from inside a home that was torn apart by a tornado (view the online sermon to see the video). How many of you recognize the song he is playing? It’s “There’s Something About That Name.” Let me read you the lyrics:

Jesus, Jesus, Jesus; there's just something about that name.
Master, Savior, Jesus, like the fragrance after the rain;
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, let all Heaven and earth proclaim
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,
But there's something about that name.

His home was just destroyed, his roof blown away, most of his possessions gone forever. He probably didn’t know where he was going to sleep that night. But what was his focus? Jesus. Jesus. Jesus. Through the storms of life, through the ups and downs, we keep our eyes on him.

As we get ready for Christmas, just a few days away, let me remind you “Whatever captures your heart will shape your life.” We want to be people like Simeon and Anna, whose hearts are captured by Jesus, who are fully committed to God, who serve him our entire lives, and who keep our focus on him. Like Simeon and Anna, might that be the legacy of our lives.