

**Devotion: “Anna & Simeon: Songs of Hope”<sup>1</sup>**

**We’ve been talking about the songs of Advent and Christmas for six weeks.** The songs we’ve embraced go far beyond contemporary or traditional music. Music is a metaphor for our life. The songs we’re exploring are lifesongs, the melodies, harmonies and counterpoints of our journey through life.

**Time for confession: I always wanted to be a professional musician.** I had a few, brief stints a few years ago, but soon realized the best thing for me was to be a talented amateur. I’m someone who enjoys listening to the music of other people. I have a great appreciation for the gifts, devotion and hard work it takes to lift others up in song. You know what I mean.

**Have you ever had a friend who could play by ear?** I did. In high school, Mike was one of my best friends. We were in band together. Mike played the trombone while I played the cornet. Mike was so-so as a trombone player. But, when he sat down to a piano - watch out!

**Mike has always been able to play the piano by ear.** I know. I tested him. I remember turning the radio on, listening to a song with him and then being amazed when he would reproduce the song on the piano. It was incredible! Elton John has the same gift. I never saw Mike practice, though I know he did. He didn’t strain or struggle or work hard at it. It didn’t look difficult and rarely sounded like it. Over the years, Mike and I were in a few pit orchestras and bands together. He played, I listened.

**Listening doesn’t get you many admirers, not like playing does.**

Yet listening is essential for us to live a spiritual life. This week, we had the opportunity to hear the lifesong of two professional listeners, Simeon and Anna. Both dedicate their lives to listening. And, when the time came, they played. They sang the song they’d been listening for. It was as if they sat down and played the tune they’d learned by ear.

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<sup>1</sup> Modified from <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/companys-coming/first-sunday-after-christmas-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/first-sunday-after-christmas-year-b-preaching-notes>

**The songs of Anna and Simeon are songs of hope.** Their narratives are long, but worth reading through, because sometimes we need to listen for a while. We needed to catch the tune; we needed to follow the rhythms. We rarely find hope all of a sudden. It grows over time as promises are made and kept.

**Simeon and Anna learned how to listen.** Believe it or not, Simeon’s name means “heard.” It was what he was born to do. So, he did. He listened; day and night, he listened. He was listening for the future. He was listening for hope. That’s what Luke tells us.

**Anna, or Chanan in Hebrew, also has a narrative that gives hope.** Her name means “favored.” She was one blessed by God’s favor. She was known as a prophetess, one who spoke to others about how God was present in their lives. Luke doesn’t tell us much about Anna. We know her life wasn’t easy. Her husband died when she was young. As a result, she probably spent most of fifty years in the temple, listening for the hope God would offer to those who visited.

**Both Simeon and Anna were listening for that which would bring peace, that which would bring light.** They listened because they knew God would answer. Day after day, they were at the temple to listen. They listened when people were happy, sad and everything in between.

**They heard the songs of those who prayed.** They heard loud, happy celebratory ones that seemed so loud and brash, but good hearted anyway. They heard the ritual ones, spoken sometimes as though they had lost their meaning, and sometimes as though the meaning was so deep it resonated through the souls of those who prayed. They heard the wordless prayers wept from swollen and reddened eyes, wrung out of twisted scraps of cloth between hands gnarled with pain and fear. They heard the proud and grateful prayers of people who knew how blessed they were. They heard them and wept and laughed with them. They heard them all for years and years.

**But Anna and Simeon heard more because they listened deeper.** They heard the responses. They heard the sighs of the Spirit as it flowed like wisps of comfort into the hearts of the hopeless and broken. They heard the soothing song of blessing as it played on hearts less in tune,

but somehow aware. They heard the invitation of the God they loved, to follow, obey, keep close and stay awake, watch and listen. They heard God’s instruction not as a hammer on a cymbal, but as a finger plucking a string. No matter what, somehow they listened and heard.

**Then, one day, they heard the music shift into a higher key.** A note of anticipation was fulfilled, a baton pointed, a new singer was taking the stage. Anna and Simeon followed the director’s gaze and welcomed the one who comes.

**Then Simeon and Anna, who lived a life of listening, became teachers of the song they knew.** They sang into the hearts of those who came carrying more than they knew. Their songs are a gift to all who listen and hear. Their songs are songs of hope, promise fulfilled.

**Simeon said, “*Now let your servant go in peace*”** (v29). I’ve always thought he was saying it was time to die, to be free from the burden of life. Luke tells us Simeon was promised he wouldn’t die until he heard what he was listening for. But maybe he was simply saying, “*I’m done listening. I’ve heard all I need to hear. I’ve heard the voice of the one who sings a song of salvation, a verse of redemption. My ears are full of that song.*” Simeon and Anna found the true source of hope: God’s promise for us all. This is the melody that changes everything.

**They may be done listening, but they aren’t done singing.** Neither are we. After hearing, it’s time to teach the song to those who will sing it. Anna and Simeon teach it to everyone who are around them, running from one to another to make sure they sing. Their message is compelling: “You can’t stand silent in worship. You can’t have closed lips for this song. It doesn’t matter whether you think you can sing or not. We need to learn the tune - the falling and the rising, the major and the minor key, that which makes us smile and that which evokes a tear.”

**We need to sing a song of promise and hope.** We might as well. God knows our inner thoughts anyway. Simeon says so, and he ought to know. He listened to those inner thoughts his whole life. So did Anna. And now they sing the song they learned by ear. They teach us to sing.

**It takes time to learn to listen, but it’s worth the effort.** The Spirit rests on us when we do, just like it rested on Simeon and Anna. Not stirred up, not agitated or poked or prodded, but rested. Maybe if we listen more to the Spirit, the voice of God, then we might know rest, as Jesus promised. But we can also learn to sing, to play by ear.

**True, singing is problematic these days.** Maybe you’re not singing at all, just listening. Or maybe you’re singing through a mask, trying not to share the droplets. That’s understandable and good for you. But the Spirit needs to be shared. The song needs to be sung, if only in our hearts and our minds.

**When we enjoy those who God brings to us, we need to spend part of our time listening.** Whether we’re talking about the Christ who was born among us, or the guests who came because we put out the welcome mat, we need to listen first. To hear their story, to learn their song, so we can sing with them. And then we need to teach our songs, Christ’s songs, so that together we can sing the chorus. We can join the angels singing praises to God and giving God all the glory.

**We can be the sign God is with us and we’re listening, singing and enjoying the company. Together, let’s listen with hope and hearts filled with promise for a new day.**

**Luke 2:22-40 (CEB)**

When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (It’s written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.”) They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what’s stated in the Law of the Lord, *A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons*. A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus’ parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said,

“Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word,  
because my eyes have seen your salvation.  
You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.  
It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and a glory for your people Israel.”

His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who belonged to the tribe of Asher. She was very old. After she married, she lived with her husband for seven years. She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day. She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Mary and Joseph had completed everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to their hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God’s favor was on him.