

**Winter Grace
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Isaiah 61:10-Isaiah 62:3**

This year Christmas crept up on me faster than I could get ready for it. Perhaps it was because there were only three weeks in Advent to squeeze everything in before December 25th. All I know is that for the first time ever in my life I went home after the Christmas Eve services and decorated my tree. And now that it's adorned with the treasured ornaments made ages ago by our children when they were young and with the ornaments collected through the years from family vacations, I'm not in any hurry to take it down. I want to savor Christmas a little longer before turning the page on a New Year and all that it will bring.

Today's story of Jesus' presentation in the temple after his birth invites us to savor Christmas a little longer, to continue to ponder the mystery and joy of Christ's birth through the voices of Simeon and Anna. On Christmas Eve we listened to Luke's story of Jesus' birth. We watched Mary and Joseph take shelter in a stable when there was no room for them in the inn. We heard angel choirs heralding good news to frightened shepherds of a Savior born in Bethlehem, singing "*Glory to God in the highest!*" We went with the shepherds to see the newborn babe lying in a manger and joined our voices with them in praising God for the gift of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Luke continues the Christmas story with the juxtaposition of Simeon and Anna, two devout people in the winter of their lives alongside the infant Jesus. Their wrinkled faces and tired eyes brighten when they recognize this baby to be the Messiah for whom they've yearned. Simeon and Anna have waited all their lives for this moment. They are in the winter years of their lives where death is not far off. To meet this baby before they die is a moment of winter grace.

Living in this part of the country where we have four distinct seasons, my guess is that if we took a poll that we'd find many of us would rank winter as our least favorite season. I know I would! Compared to spring, summer and fall, winter seems barren and colorless. Cold temperatures drive us inside. Ice hinders our ability to easily get around. Snow creates exhausting work for us, clearing driveways and sidewalks. And then there's the inconvenience of winter... the layering on of coats, hats, gloves, scarves and boots to simply go outside.

While all that is true about winter, there is also a gift of *winter grace* to be found in the barrenness of the season if we're open to it. "Winter reveals things that summer

conceals. We can see farther and with clearer vision. Paths that were covered by vines and leaves in the summer and fall open up and we can walk on them.”(1) We discover nests in the bare branches that once cradled new life. We are gifted with vistas of beauty and possibility once invisible to us.

In the winter of his life Simeon is gifted by the Holy Spirit to lay eyes upon the long awaited Messiah and hold him in his arms. He recognizes in this tiny, vulnerable infant a savior, the fulfillment of all his hopes and of all the hopes of every man, woman and child ever to live on this planet. His life is complete, he is now ready to die in peace knowing God’s promise to redeem Israel and the world now takes flesh in this child.

He responds with an odd song of praise that speaks of dying and hope saying: *“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”* (vs. 29-32)

While Mary and Joseph stand in amazement at what Simeon says about their son, he goes on to offer a blessing that must have been more than a little disturbing to these parents. He prophesies that this child will cause the rise and fall of many and be a sign that is opposed. He speaks of the price both Mary and her son will pay, saying that a sword will pierce her heart. Glory and anguish, joy and sorrow, welcome and opposition will all be part of this child’s life, just as they are parts of all our lives. And that’s kind of the point of God coming to be with us as one of us.

There would have been crowds in the temple that day when Mary and Joseph presented their infant son to the Lord. Many others would have encountered this couple and their baby in the temple yet there was nothing about them that made them stand out or that made people take notice of them except for Anna and Simeon. I find it interesting that Simeon and Anna were the only ones who recognized a visitation from God through this tiny baby when he appeared in the temple. These two people in the winter of their lives were the ones who had eyes to see him, hearts to receive him and voices to praise God for the gift of a savior.

Grace is the entry of God into our lives. And winter grace is the entry of God into the barren places in our lives. It is always there, but we don’t always notice it. When we speak of our later years as the winter of our lives, it’s a metaphor for a season that we often dread, but which is also holds potential for new vision, understanding and wisdom . . . if we’re open to it.

Winter can also be a metaphor for hard times we go through that seem grey and difficult: such as when we find ourselves facing the challenges of declining health or the challenges of unemployment or an injustice done to us. It may be when we’re grieving the death of someone we love or finding ourselves lost in seemingly hopeless

circumstances. It's the places in our lives that are like the mythical land of Narnia where it is always winter but never Christmas.

Though I would never choose them, those times in my life that have been the hardest have also been the ones where I have received the greatest gifts. They are times when I've encountered God's presence and profoundly experienced the deep peace of Christ that surpasses all understanding. The barren times when I have been stripped of self-confidence, joy and hope have been the times when God unexpectedly shows up through another person, or a kind word spoken, or a new insight or a new opportunity. They are the times when despite evidence to the contrary, that I know with certainty that God is with me.

Simeon and Anna direct us to the significance of who this infant Jesus is and hint at what he will do. They point us to recognize Jesus in our own lives for who he is as God's son and for the sacrifice he makes to redeem us and restore us back to God. They invite us to ponder this story anew and to open to awareness of God's presence with us now, in the midst our fears and challenges. They encourage us to sing praises to God for the gift of Jesus with us no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in. They call us to spread Christmas hope to neighbors and a world longing for winter grace.

Like Simeon and Anna we too have a place in this ongoing story of salvation through Jesus Christ. We are citizens of the kingdom of God that breaks in with his birth. As those who embrace Jesus as savior we have opportunities to put flesh in the game of his salvation story.

We can seek out new paths that lead to peace. We can resist evil with actions for justice. We can live into a different vision for this world that chooses love, inclusion and compassion over hatred, exclusion and heartlessness.

To those of us living in the northern hemisphere, Christmas comes as winter grace. Wherever things seem lifeless, or hopeless or unwanted, those places hold the potential for us to discover a gift from God for us that was once hidden by the fullness of our earlier life.

Sometimes it's in the winter of our lives, the hard places, the dead ends, when all is stripped away that what really matters comes to the surface. It's in that moment of clarity that we recognize God's presence with us and are given winter grace to live into the future with hope, peace and love.

Presbyterian pastor, Beth Scibienski points out: *"Unlike the other figures in the nativity story, Simeon and Anna didn't get an angelic announcement nor did they receive celestial navigation. They had their heart and their mind and their faith and their eyes –*

just like us." Before we turn the page on a new year Simeon and Anna invite us to look back upon the past year with eyes of faith. Let us pay attention and notice where in the past year Jesus has met us along the way with God's grace, so that we can carry it forward into the New Year to face whatever will come with the hope and deep peace of knowing . . . that God will be with us.

*In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.*

1. Kathleen Fischer, *Winter Grace, Spirituality for the Later Years*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 5