

BELPRES CHURCH

December 29

Luke 2:22-40

Speakers: Annie Duncan, Anthony Ballard and Dr. Scott Dudley

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Annie Duncan:

Okay, well this is the part in our service where we're going to spend some time reflecting. And look who's joining us, Pastor Scott is here.

Anthony:

Wow.

Annie Duncan:

So we're going to spend some time walking through Luke 2. So if you have a Bible or if you want to open your Bible app, you can do that. Otherwise, the scripture will be on the screen as well. So we're going to walk through Luke 2 and then spend some time reflecting on 2024 together.

So starting in verse 22. "When the time came for the purification rites required by the law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem." That's Jesus. "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 is 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, for him to do the custom of the laws 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 the 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 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 Phanuel in the tribe of Asher. She was very old and she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage and then was a widow until she was 84. 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 were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee and to their own town of Nazareth, and the child grew and became strong. He was filled with wisdom and the grace of God was on him."

Pastor Scott:

Amen.

Annie Duncan:

The word of the Lord.

Pastor Scott:

One of the things I like in this story, this comes right after the shepherds. So we see the shepherds, they go, they see Jesus, they leave and this comes right after it. So it's kind of the next thing, and it's about the faithfulness of ordinary people. The chapter two, Luke's 2, the first words are, "In the days of Caesar Augustus." So you start with the emperor of the known world at the time, but then you move progressively through to these ordinary people shepherds. And even in this story, Joseph and Mary, they bring two doves. The wealthier people were required to bring a lamb, but if you didn't have a lot of money, you could just bring two doves instead. And this is one of the ways that we know that Jesus was in a family that didn't have a lot of money.

And then so you start with Caesar Augustus, you go to shepherds, you go to two ordinary teenagers having a baby in a barn, and then you get to these two older people, Simeon and Anna, and we find out that they have been waiting their whole lives. The Holy Spirit has told them that they would live long enough to see the redemption of Israel, long enough to see the Messiah. There they've been, and it says Anna was there day and night in the temple, but they're just faithful, faithful people waiting on the Lord.

And the first sermon we preached in Advent was about How long, oh Lord? How long do you wait on God and how do we wait on God? And they waited their whole lives to see what God had promised. And I am an impatient person and I don't want to wait my whole life for things. So this challenges me, and I wonder how they were able to be faithful through that, the years of faithfully waiting on God, believing, not giving up on the promise. No, I heard the Lord say this and I'm going to trust the Lord and be faithful. And I think one of the keys, and I mentioned this in the first sermon in Advent, one of the keys to waiting is that hint that we get that they were in the temple always. That one of

the ways they were able to wait was they were not waiting on the thing they were waiting for. They were waiting on the one who gives it to them.

And worship. When we focus on Jesus, not the thing we're waiting for, but when we focus on Jesus, our worship helps carry us through to remain faithful. And there had to be lots of times, I mean there had to be times when they'd be like, "This ain't ever going to happen. I'm just never going to see this. I've been decades now and maybe I heard wrong and maybe..." Right? And yet in all of that, they just kept going to Jesus, going to worship, being in God's community in the temple together with other believers and focusing on the one that they were waiting on. And as long as we're focused on the one we're waiting on, the thing we're waiting for becomes secondary because when we have the presence of Jesus, that's satisfying enough.

Annie Duncan:

This is such a familiar Christmas story, right? Chapters one and two, and I think we can forget how dark these two chapters are and the amount of suffering that's there too with them waiting, I Simeon says, "I can now die." They're just waiting to die to see these things fulfilled. But as we were preparing for this, that's something that kept on jumping out to me is don't miss the hard in this section of scripture, there's a lot of suffering and darkness, and yet Jesus is this resounding light in the midst of that.

Pastor Scott:

I think that's an important point because I think when sometimes we read scripture, it's so condensed that it makes it sound easy. And then when we go through something really hard that takes maybe decades to unfold before we see the goodness of God in a way that really satisfies us, we can feel like we're doing something wrong. Because everyone in the Bible, they prayed and then it happened. No, it takes a long time. And even the way we preach is sort of unavoidable, but we tell stories in sermons and we condense them. And what that doesn't capture is the years and the years and the years of the pain, the suffering, the wandering, the waiting.

Anthony:

I think you mentioned faithfulness of these two, and I think that's just so important to capture. These two, you said waited for so long and all they had to do was see the promise that God had given them. There was a lot that they knew about what the Messiah was going to be and what this Messiah was going to do. But once they saw Jesus, they felt the full promise of God fulfilled in that moment. And they didn't have to see Jesus grow up to be a man and see him go to the cross and then resurrected. They didn't see any of that. They just saw the baby. And for them, that was enough to know that God was going to do everything else that he was going to promise for Israel and for them.

And I can't imagine knowing, and the amount of trust that you have to put into God, who's already invisible by the way, to speak something to you, and then just to see it as an infant of an idea before he can talk, before he can walk or do anything. And they knew all that was going to come from just that moment.

And again, as you said, decades. Anna was here for decades of time and she stayed in this temple. How many of us want to stay in church for more than an hour? That's a long time. And if I'm here for eight hours, I'm like, I'm ready to go home. But man, just her faithfulness to God to wait and wait on him and then to see it and be satisfied.

Pastor Scott:

And to not even see all of it. Yeah, that's a good point. It could certainly seem like an anti-climax, right? I waited 84 years-

Anthony:

For a baby.

Pastor Scott:

For a baby. Okay, I mean, he's cute, but it didn't feel like because they trusted God so much, it's like, okay, I've seen enough. I've seen what you promised me, and I'm going to believe on faith of all that's yet to come that I won't see. Whereas I think for US, Americans, we might want a little more than that, but to be satisfied with what God gives us.

Annie Duncan:

Anthony, I'm curious, reading through these familiar stories, now that you're a dad, really cute daughter, Hananiah. How has reading these scriptures changed now that you're a father to a really beautiful daughter?

Anthony:

I think you can see the fullness of a promise of God in a baby. That's something I resonate with. They could see a baby and see a fullness of a promise. And so for us, we named her Hananiah, which Hananiah means God is gracious or Yahweh is gracious, and it's a name that you can find in the book of Daniel. And for us, one of the things Sarah wrote in her vows in our wedding was from Genesis, and it was a promise that God had given Sarah in the Bible. And it said the Lord was gracious to Sarah and he gave her everything that he promised her.

And so when we had this child together, the name Hananiah had come unto me back in my twenties, so this is maybe seven years ago, I had felt I wanted to name my child that. And so we feel that we have experienced nothing but God's graciousness from us meeting each other and getting married to then having this baby. And it is just the story of our lives, God's graciousness. And so she is like an embodiment of that. And that's not to put undue pressure on her, but we're trusting God that he's going to allow her to fulfill her name as she grows up and gets older.

And in Hebrew scripture and in ancient Hebrew scripture names meant so much. People, what they were named was their life. And so that's our prayer for her, that she would live out fully her name and experience God's graciousness in everything that she does. And so we can see it now even through the crying and the not going to sleep.

Annie Duncan:

The first time I got to hold her, she's kind of fussy, and I was holding her as long as I could. And then I went to pray over your guys' household. And the moment I started to pray, her eyes just locked in and she was still, and I was like, whoa, this little baby. This little baby is anointed. She knows she loves prayer already. It was so cool.

Anthony:

That's what we do. We try to pray over her now.

Annie Duncan:

Yeah, yeah.

Anthony:

Yeah.

Annie Duncan:

I think another thing that is really interesting about these first two chapters of Luke and especially the chapter or the section that we just read is as you're walking through this Christmas narrative, you can find yourself somewhere in the narrative. There's so many different characters leading up through what we just read. There's Mary, there's Elizabeth and Zachariah, a couple that had been trying to have a baby. There's the shepherds, and then there's these two older people in the section that we just read that have been waiting so long. And I feel like Luke is just drawing everybody in saying, find yourself in this story. There is a place for everybody in the story of Jesus. And I think that is so powerful. I think that's intentional because we all do have a place in Jesus' story. And as we reflect on 2024, we've seen Jesus move in so many stories in our congregation in so many different ways and in our personal lives as well. I mean just you and Sarah becoming parents, that's a big part of 2024 for you. So as we reflect on the year, what sticks out?

Pastor Scott:

For me, it's no secret that the pandemic was hard on all of us, and the pandemic was hard on every part of our cultural life, including church and you know this because we were in it. And the lockdowns and then all the divisiveness and all of that. And so it feels like it's been a couple of hard years. But for me personally, I was just telling someone this morning, it's like 2024, I felt a little bit, I mean, hadn't been waiting for decades, but a little bit like Anna and Simeon where I felt like we could see stuff happening in our community and it's going to be good, it's going to be good, but we are just getting through the pandemic and the aftermath of pandemic and a once in a century event, things are going to be different. It's not like you're going to snap right back to 2019. And so just working through that.

But this year, I just feel like there's been a lot of movement and traction for us as a community, starting with the sermon series on Sabbath where we were really trying to do something that we preach about but don't often actually do.

But then I think a highlight for me was the prayer and fasting weekend, and it'd been years since we've done that, anything close to that. And I came Friday night, I was here between about, I think about 10 o'clock and midnight. And there was this one moment in the lobby where Pastor Alexis was out there leading prayer, and people were just starting to pray spontaneously in their own language. Some of us were praying in English, some in Kenyawanda, but not just Kenyawanda. Think there was some Swahili. I heard some French, and I felt like, wow, it just felt like life. I refer a lot to Revelation seven, every tribe, tongue, and nation before the throne. It felt like Revelation seven. But it also felt, for me personally, this thing that I felt like not necessarily that God had promised, but that I, and we as a community have been waiting on. God's doing something here. It felt a little bit like Simeon and Anna. It's not the fullness of what God wants to do, but I could get a glimpse of it, and I'm like, thank you. I was just grateful.

That thank you, God. This is happening at Bell Pres and all the different people here, all the different languages, but all the unity focused on Jesus. And you could just feel the presence of God in the lobby. You could just almost physically feel it. And I just felt like that was... Christmas is all about Jesus appearing. I feel like that was a place where Jesus appeared and I could see it. So for me, 2020 spiritually as a congregation, that was one of the highlights for me.

Anthony:

Yeah, I can just agree with the Sabbath series as well. One of the things I really loved about that is that we kept calling the congregation to try again, do it again, do it again. And for me-

Annie Duncan:

For real, pick a day.

Anthony:

For real. For real this time.

Annie Duncan:

Pick a day. Yeah.

Anthony:

So for real. But for me, I think that's one of the things I need in my own walk is to try again and repeat something and practice it. And that was in March and we're in December, and I still don't have the perfect Sabbath. I still need to put my phone down and put electronics away so I can focus on just relaxing and resting in God's goodness. And so for me, I'm still trying to live out what we preached about months ago. And so I

encourage all of us to keep working on that Sabbath, keep finding it wherever you might be.

And just to also go on the prayer and fasting weekend. I had several hours there back and forth trying to help coordinate it too. But 1:00 AM, no, it was like 2:00 AM to 3:00 AM I was there and what a special time. I was there when it was like everyone there, dozens of people there praying together and then going back in the quiet stillness of the early morning was just, it was me and two other people in there.

And I had my list of things that I had prepared beforehand to say, God, here's things that I need to bring to you that I don't know how to, I can't do it. It's impossible, literally. I have to bring it to you. And I just prayed over those things for an hour that morning in the still quiet quietness of the night and seeing almost... It's not magic guys, but just to see God start to do things that I can't do on my own after taking it in prayer and fasting was just amazing. And then I broke the fast with Chic-Fil-A. So I went right over to Chick-fil-A because I also closed the night. So I locked up the church and put everything back and said, all right, let's go eat.

Annie Duncan:

Amen.

Anthony:

Let's not waste any time.

Pastor Scott:

No.

Anthony:

Chic-Fil-A, it was Saturday. So they're open.

Annie Duncan:

I was at the prayer and fasting thing in the afternoon, and there was quite a few people there. And this is one of those things that, you know this, "When two or three are gathered," Jesus says, "I'm there." And I was just amazed at being reminded of that because I sat down in the welcome room, pulled out my journal, asked Jesus a question, and just felt like it was seamless, just tuning into that flow where I immediately started to hear him respond. And that doesn't always happen for me. Sometimes I have to wait a long time, but just because I think the whole sanctuary and church was filled with people all united in seeking after the Lord, it was just like, I don't know. I feel like there's a special sound effect for that, but just I was in, locked in. It was really powerful.

And going back to how we started 2024 with Sabbath, and I was reflecting on this with you, Scott, just going to a Christian school, going to seminary, being raised in a Christian household, we had all the information about Sabbath, but I never saw anybody in my life actually model it. And there was a staff meeting where you talked to our staff about what this has looked like for you. And I don't think you knew that you were doing this, but you

were discipling all of us. You were saying, "No, this is how I've built it into my routine, how I've been practicing it." And that's maybe the first time I've actually heard somebody show the fruit of what Sabbath can do.

Pastor Scott:

Well, it came from not doing it.

Annie Duncan:

Well, and that's often-

Pastor Scott:

And getting burnt out.

Annie Duncan:

... how it happens.

Pastor Scott:

Oh, I need to change this. But yeah. I think the other thing we saw this year, as a congregation, your faithfulness is incredible.

One of the things I say when I'm bragging about you to other people around the country is I say one of the great things about Bell Pres is, if a pastor or any of us stands in the pulpit and points to scripture and says it's here, that the majority of this church will go, okay, even if I don't like it, but okay, I'll do it. Right. And you can do anything with a church like that. And I think with all the things this year, the Sabbath, so many of you faithfully really trying to make that a part of your life, the prayer and fasting weekend, blown away by how many of you participated the Bible reading plan in the summer, and then this year when we did the anointing Sunday wondering, is anyone going to come forward or not? And almost everyone did. I feel like that creates a sense of unity. But it also reminds me and us of how faithful you are, including the budget problems we had, which was another piece of 2024 where you all stepped up so well.

You're a faithful church, Bell Pres, and a faithful God can do so much with a faithful church. And I think in all these things, we're experiencing God's spirit more and more. I think you referred to the Anointing Sunday as a three-

Annie Duncan:

Three Kleenex. Yeah.

Pastor Scott:

Three Kleenex. Yeah.

Annie Duncan:

I needed three Kleenexes.

Pastor Scott:

So I mean, I think anytime you could get God's frozen chosen moving and experiencing deeply his presence in worship, those are really good things. And that's the faithfulness of our God, the power of His Holy Spirit, but also you. It's your faithfulness in 2024. And what else does God want to do with us in 2025?

Annie Duncan:

And early in 2025, we're going to get to discern and practice fasting and praying again as a congregation.

Pastor Scott:

As we move into our 70th year, our 70th anniversary a year from now. Like I said, God could do a lot with this faithful congregation. So starting January, we're going to start discerning what that is, and we're going to invite you into that.

Annie Duncan:

Yeah, it's exciting.

Anthony:

Good stuff.

Annie Duncan:

We don't just pray and fast once.

Anthony:

It is a practice.

Pastor Scott:

It is a practice.

Anthony:

Anna prayed and fasted the whole time, I don't know how she did it.

Pastor Scott:

84 years.

Anthony:

84 years of prayer and fasting. Yeah. There is one thing, maybe this makes the outtakes, I don't know, but I just looking at something that Simeon's saying here, after he breaks out in a prophetic word to Mary.

And he talks about this child will cause the rise and fall many in Israel. And he says, "A sword would pierce your own soul." And he's saying that to the mother of this child. And

it's true, just later in this chapter, Jesus goes and gets lost and he's in a temple and they can't find them. And when they do find them, Mary and Joseph say, "Why have you treated us this way? Why have you done such a thing?" And he says, "Don't you know I have to be about my father's business and be doing what he's doing?" And Jesus would go on and do many things that were unusual for a child, never disobedient, but unusual because he was God and man.

And even Mary, he had to go to the cross, and you imagine what a mother, she did raise this child and feed him, and he still had to go on and do the things that Jesus was called to do. And I just think if Mary, the mother of Jesus' soul was going to be pierced by her son, how much more us as we follow him, as we seek hearing his voice in prayer and fasting? He might say something to us that just pricks our heart, and we've got to be ready to hear that.

Annie Duncan:

Yeah.

Anthony:

If it happened to his mom, I'm not his mom. It can happen to me too.

Pastor Scott:

It can happen to us, yeah.

Anthony:

I think just being willing to hear whatever it is he has to say, and it's always good. It's just sometimes unusual.

Pastor Scott:

She had to watch him be crucified, but she also got to see him raised from the dead. So a fully-yielded person, even if it requires sacrifice and pain, a fully-yielded church, a fully-yielded community, we can see some glorious resurrections. Yeah.

Anthony:

Yeah. Amen.

Annie Duncan:

That's a good word. That's a good word-

Anthony:

Great word.

Annie Duncan:

... to end on.

Anthony:

Yeah.

Annie Duncan:

Yeah. Well, thank you Bell Pres for joining in these reflections with us, and we're just looking forward to what God has for all of us in 2025.

Anthony:

Amen.

Pastor Scott:

Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What are some key take aways for you?
- How might you respond this week?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.