



# January BLUES

..... JANUARY 15, 2023 | LUKE 2:22-40 .....

# *JANUARY BLUES*

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January is a tricky month, I find.

It starts really, really well with the tail-end of Christmas and the fun of New Year's celebrations, and, if Santa was generous, the enjoyment of gifts received and gifts given. We might even be bold and make new resolutions or at least, some hopeful plans for the year ahead. But after that, January really can go either way. It's back to work or back to school, back to our regular tasks, to our daily grind, another year stretching out ahead of us, full of potential and full of unknowns. I mean, better than the alternative; but how are you thinking or feeling about it this year? Now that the festive dust has settled, are you full of anticipation and excitement at the beginning of this new year, like a kid at the top of a snowy hill with his sled, ready to whoosh down? Or do you find yourself beginning the year with a feeling like a low-traction tire spin on an icy road: lots of effort being put in for not a lot of forward motion?

The turn of the calendar year can put us in a reflective mood, but it's not just the January slump that can give us the blues, and leave us feeling like we're just spinning our wheels. I dream of being the sort of person who lays out her goals and aspirations for the year, maps out a plan for accomplishing them and then does it. I am not; the year proceeds anyway.

I hope you will join me in admitting that there are times in life when we don't think we're making much forward progress.

Perhaps it's in our relationships, or at work: the same disagreements and problems with a spouse or partner or friend, the lack of advancement or sense of accomplishment in our job. Or it might be in our health, an inability to move forward with weight loss or fitness goals; or just in the things we'd like to spend more time doing: reading or crafting, travelling or hobby-ing. And it might be our spiritual growth that's stalled, our faith not growing, our sense of connection with God stagnant where we'd hoped for vibrancy. Sometimes, it can feel like each day or week or month is a re-run, a retreading of the same ground, with no forward motion for all our effort spent, with no positive change in sight in the year ahead.

Maybe it's partly due to all these gray, sunless days and the come-down from all that sugary Christmas candy; maybe not. That tires-spinning, low-traction feeling as we try to move through our days and weeks can be all too real, sometimes, wintry weather aside.

Way back at the beginning of Advent, the prophet Isaiah reminded God's people – reminded us – that there is no hope for a new future without God doing something to make that new thing possible. So today's message is all about throwing a little spiritual salt-and-sand mix under our tires to give us some traction and get us moving forward into the new year.

Two people who show us strikingly clear and personal examples of what appears to be life on endless repeat are Simeon and Anna, from our Gospel lesson today. Simeon had been waiting for years and years, for a promise to be filled, a promise that he could do nothing to fulfil himself; Simeon had to wait on God. Anna had just been doing the same thing, every single day, for over sixty years.

Reading again this favourite January story of mine from Luke's gospel, I find myself wondering this year...how did they keep going? And why? How did Simeon keep expecting God to keep that promise to him? How did Anna keep returning to the Temple to pray and worship, every day, from her youth to her old age?

Simeon was, we believe, an older man, though not so elderly as Anna. He was led by and clearly in prayerful relationship with God, so much so that he had deep confidence that a personal promise – that Simeon would live long enough to see his Messiah, his Saviour, face-to-face – he had deep confidence that promise would be kept. There's no sense of frustration or impatience or loss of hope and confidence; Simeon waited, absolutely sure that God would come through for him.

Anna was eighty-four years old, a woman who had been a widow most of her life. If she'd been married in her early or mid-teens, as was common back then, then Anna had been in the Temple, praying and worshipping, fasting and working, every day, since her twenties, some sixty years. Her dedication was worthy of note by Luke in his gospel; it is still rather startling to us today. There's no sense that Anna is bored or settling for this life or feeling stuck in a rut; rather, we might describe it as a productive holy hanging out, present and ready, in the Temple.

Mary and Joseph and Jesus coming to the Temple for the baby's circumcision, which functioned rather like a baptism, making Jesus part of God's people, this moment happened eight days after Jesus' birth. It's strange to realize, from our perspective today, that all the Advent and Christmas excitement of Mary and Elizabeth, Joseph and his dreams, the journey to Bethlehem, angels and shepherds proclaiming and running to and fro...the number of people who knew about Jesus' birth was still very small. Just the people we've named, and whomever the shepherds had managed to tell, in the week since the big day. The Magi aren't even on the horizon at this point, although their star is.

And that means that, on that day in the Temple, God's people were still waiting. Still longing for their Saviour, proclaimed by Isaiah, so many centuries ago. Still yearning for God to keep God's promise, after ages of interminable waiting, of hard years in exile, of challenging years spent rebuilding their homeland, of conquest and invasion, civil disputes and villainous kings. In the weeks after Christmas, God's people did not know that their Messiah had come, and so, they waited. Here, with Simeon and Anna, that waiting is made incredible personal for us.

It's not always about nations and empires and the long sweep of history. When we say "God's people waited," it means that individual human beings who loved and trusted and believed in God waited, individual human beings who felt that God's promises were personal, for them.

And Anna and Simeon, well; they are familiar sorts of people to us, I'd say. Men and women who are present and active and engaged in religious life, who have a lifetime's worth of faith-living behind them, who trust, who have that relationship with God, who take comfort and find new meaning after grief and loss in their faith communities. We know men and women like that; they are present with us here, today; you might be one, yourself.

And Anna and Simeon knew God's big promises, read about them and heard them preached, just as we have, and knew that those promises were personal – made to them – as much as to the nation. Like the child born to us, to you and to me, yet born also to save, for the redemption, of Jerusalem, the world, and the whole of creation.

Eight days after the Messiah was born, God kept his promise to Simeon, and honoured Anna's persistence and dedication to prayer. Simeon did indeed get to meet his Messiah, something he had waited and longed for, ever since the Spirit of God promised him he would see Jesus, face-to-face.

The beautiful words that Simeon responded with – you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation – those words have been part of Christian liturgy and worship for many centuries, as we share Simeon's yearning and his gratitude. Simeon trusted that God would be faithful to the promise God made to him, as unlikely and outrageous as it was.

Anna, though, hadn't been promised anything quite so specific, beyond the promises God makes to all who believe in and follow him. Instead, she'd embraced a lifelong vocation of prayer and fasting in the Temple, which gave her sharp eyes and an open heart to see the work of God around her, and the words to explain what that work was. On what was a perfectly ordinary day, as she did what she had been doing every day for decades, Anna recognised Jesus clearly for who he was, and proclaimed it: here at last was the child who would redeem Jerusalem, the worshipping heart of God's people.

The two of them are a wonderful example of faithfulness as a spiritual discipline, or practice. And I really do think that faithfulness is how both Simeon and Anna kept going, kept expecting God to keep God's promise to him, kept returning to the Temple and investing herself in her religious community.

A spiritual discipline might sound rather stern, but all it means is a habitual, daily dedication to practices that grow our relationship with God, things we do, drawing on the Bible and church tradition for inspiration, to grow spiritually in Christ. Spiritual disciplines require intention, dedication, and sometimes, plain stubborn effort, and Simeon and Anna's spiritual discipline of faithfulness certainly needed all three of those qualities.

We are reading about the day that God kept his promise to Simeon, and Luke gives us an image of Simeon's quiet joy and deep connection with the Spirit as he meets Jesus. Simeon's belief in God's promise that this amazing thing would happen made sense and seems like it must've been easy to maintain on that day; but Simeon believed every day: all the days that God's promise wasn't kept, as well as on the day that it was.

As for Anna, it seems that she took the great tragedy of her life – becoming a widow at a very young age – and gave it all over to God, settling into a vocation of worship through prayer and fasting. And she continued in this discipline, every day, for the rest of her life.

Being faithful and continuing to trust in God is not always easy, nor is it an automatic state of being for those who believe in and follow Jesus. We have our good days and bad days; our “ups and downs” in our faith and trust in God; we can spin our wheels and get stuck on the icy, treacherous places on our spiritual walk with Jesus.

Perhaps the most appealing thing about Simeon and Anna is their capacity for persistent faith, their constancy in trusting God, in worshipping God. We see their spiritual discipline of faithfulness in this brief glimpse of their very ordinary lives; but there’s another image of faithfulness in this story, too: God’s faithfulness.

Like Paul said in his letter to the Corinthian churches, right at the beginning, God is faithful. Although we might have our ups and downs and our wheel-spinning moments when it comes to faithfulness, God doesn’t.

God’s faithfulness is an unchanging and unchangeable fact, and it’s demonstrated in countless ways in our lives, big and small, ways that are obvious to us and sometimes, sadly, unrecognised by us. One of the realities of being Christian is that everything we do – our worship, our mission, our faith itself – these things don’t originate in us, independently. It’s all a response to God: God’s being, God’s character, God’s actions, God’s love. The certainty that God is faithful is our firm foundation, a truth we can rely on and build on; God’s faithfulness is the beginning, the starting point of our faith in God in return.

And when we trust that God is faithful, we are changed by that trust: trusting in God’s faithfulness gives us confidence that God will...be God – loving, present, and active – and it helps us to wait patiently, to overcome challenges, to persevere during difficult moments, to see God’s work around us and to speak of it, and to act.

What God’s faithfulness is not is the absence of worry and waiting, of fear and anxiety, of pain and suffering. Nor is God’s faithfulness the presence of good luck, easy living, good health and enough wealth. And sometimes, that makes it easy to give up or doubt God’s goodness and faithfulness. But Simeon and Anna’s moment with Jesus, just eight days after his birth, encourages us to keep at it anyway, especially if we’re waiting for things that God has promised us.

Like Simeon, we can wait confidently, every day; all the days that it's difficult, as well as on the days that it's easy. Like Anna, we pray, not to annoy God into doing what we want, but to remain committed to God's promises, faithful as God is faithful to us. And our persistence will be honoured and we will see God, where others might not.

We are called to be living expressions of God's faithfulness to those around us, and to the wider world. That January low traction, no forward movement, feeling, or that anticipatory, excited, what will the year ahead bring attitude: both offer us the opportunity to be those living expressions of our faithful God.

Let me put it to you this way: when we're going through a rough time, how do we think about it? What is our inner monologue? Do we think, "this is awful, there's no end in sight to what I'm going through, it's just one thing after another, what did I do to deserve all this trouble?"

What does that say about God and our trust in him? If we share our worries and troubles with others in this way, what does it tell them about what God means to us? Nothing good, I'm afraid; nothing about God's faithfulness, or God's promise-keeping, or God's supportive presence and love.

Or what about if we're having a really fantastic week, where everything is easy and good things just keep piling up? Do we say, "I'm having a great week! I'm so happy that all these good things happened! What a lucky coincidence?" If we rejoice in this way, what does it tell us about our ability to recognise God-at-work when we see it? It tells us we can't see God at work at all. And how can we share the truth of the good things we experience when we don't even know that truth ourselves?

We are called to pray and speak and sing of God's faithfulness, and we are called to live as real, live-action reminders of that faithfulness so that those around us can know and see all this good news that we experience because of Jesus, who is our Messiah, too. Like Anna and Simeon, we can embrace the spiritual discipline of faithfulness, and be ready and waiting, prepared and expectant, that God's faithfulness will be revealed in turn for us this year.

So this is the spiritual salt-and-sand mix we can throw under our tires this year, when we need it: God is faithful. It's as simple as that.

On difficult days or good days, we can say, God is faithful. We can say it with hope, we can say it with awe, we can say it with a smile, we can say it through our tears and through our fear: God is faithful; God is faithful to you.

It's the starting point of the answers to every question we'll ever have about our faith, our lives, what happens to us and in us and for us, and why God does or doesn't do what God does. God is faithful. Let's start our year there. Thanks be to God, amen.