



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

Seeing the Miracle

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 2:22-40

Dec. 31, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Sally S. Wright

If you saw a miracle, would you know it? If I am honest about this question, I am not sure I would. So, today, we are going to take some cues from Simeon's and Anna's stories in the Bible. Then we are going to look at major medical advances in the developing world. And lastly, I will draw on Paul Simon's incredible work as a singer-songwriter over his 80 years.

What a great Bible story we just read! We have two named people in the Bible who see baby Jesus in the Jerusalem temple and tell about it. Simeon and Anna are both in the temple the day that Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus for dedication and to bring a purification sacrifice to God.

On first pass, it makes total sense that Simeon and Anna would make a fuss about this new baby. We know it is not uncommon for people to fawn and coo and fuss over a new baby. They are so small and cute and have what my friend Jason calls "the new baby smell." The smell is a bit sweet and soft. Of course, Anna and Simeon would want to make a fuss over this new baby.

But how did Simeon and Anna know that this child was the one—the miracle, the Messiah? How did they know that they were seeing a miracle in front of them? And how can we know when we see a miracle?

Based on the text, there are at least three practices that create an environment for Anna and Simeon to know they are seeing the miracle of the Messiah. The first practice is faithful study. The text tells us in verse 25 that Simeon was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. Verse 37 tells us Anna never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day.

It is certain that these two prophets knew their Bible, the Torah. They knew scripture; they trusted in the promises of God. They prayed devoutly day

and night. They fasted. Anna and Simeon both knew the hope of the coming of the Messiah. Both of them keenly felt the tension within Jerusalem eagerly awaiting the Messiah's coming. To them, though, this Messiah would be the one who would deliver Israel from the rule of Roman Imperialism. A Messiah thought to be a great army general or warrior.

Yet, Anna and Simeon would have known about Isaiah's promise about "a little child shall lead them," and the coming of a wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father and prince of peace. With a foundation of faithful study of scripture, Anna and Simeon were grounded enough to be open to the Holy Spirit's movement.

Leading us to our second practice: Openness to the Holy Spirit. Simeon and Anna were well versed in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt in the Exodus. They would have practiced this every year at Passover. Anna and Simeon likely believed that the coming of the Messiah might look like the story of Moses. So it was imperative that Anna and Simeon be open to the Holy Spirit's movement. Verse 26 tells us, "It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah." Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before he died. I wonder what type of Messiah Simeon had been looking for: A great warrior? A powerful ruler? Or was it another type of Messiah? I wonder if Simeon was expecting a tiny newborn baby in the temple? It seems in this moment that Simeon's openness to the Holy Spirit is what allowed him to not miss the opportunity to see the miracle of the Messiah's presence.

With a strong foundation of faithful study and openness to the Holy Spirit, Anna and Simeon were ready for the third practice: Seeing the miracle. It is not enough to be prepared through faithful study

and to be open to the wily movement of the Holy Spirit. There is a third step that happens in this story. Simeon *sees* the miracle of the Messiah. Verse 27 says, “Guided by the Spirit, Simeon went into the temple and as soon as Mary and Joseph walked in, Simeon knew that he was seeing the Messiah.”

There is an interesting nuance here. Simeon does not passively see the Messiah enter the temple in his mother’s arms. Simeon does not merely see from afar and tell his friends about it. No, Simeon walks over to Jesus, Mary and Joseph, picks up the baby in his arms and launches into song about the greatness of God. The text goes on to say the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about their baby. Witnessing Simeon’s reaction to the miracle of the Messiah seems to cement for Mary and Joseph that their new baby is destined to bring Good News to the World.

Additionally, the text tells us the prophet Anna (in verse 38) began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Just like Simeon, Anna comes to tell about the child who will redeem Jerusalem. Anna does not simply feel the guiding of the Holy Spirit and keep the information to herself. She acts upon it and tells people about it. Anna does not just whisper this to her closest friends; she shares it with others in the temple. Anna and Simeon both do not simply see the miracle of the Messiah with their eyes—they talk about it, sing about it and tell people about it.

Simeon and Anna were both devout Jews who had been faithful in the Jerusalem temple. They were attuned to the Holy Spirit’s movement and open to what the Holy Spirit would reveal to them. When the miracle walked through the doors, into the temple, they saw it, named it and sang praises to God.

So, it makes sense that in a biblical story that the characters would be devout, attuned to the Holy Spirit and see the miracle. I wonder if this framework works in the real world?

Let me set up a complex problem for you. In Steven Johnson’s book, “Where Good Ideas Come From,” he shares how an incubator is standard equipment in every major hospital in the developed world today. But in developing nations, many infants

die that might survive with a newborn incubator. The problem is not with access to incubators. The real hurdle is the need for parts and expertise to repair the machines.

A researcher observed that the even smallest towns in the developing world could keep their automobiles running and suggested the idea to make newborn incubators with automobile parts. And three years later, a team named Design that Matters came up with a device called the NeoNurture.

Johnson writes, “Three years after Rosen suggested the idea, the Design that Matters team introduced a prototype device called NeoNurture. From the outside, it looked like a streamlined modern incubator, but its guts were automotive. Sealed-beam headlights supplied the crucial warmth; dashboard fans provided filtered air circulation; door chimes sounded alarms. You could power the device via an adapted cigarette lighter, or a standard-issue motorcycle battery. Building the NeoNurture out of car parts was doubly efficient, because it tapped both the local supply of parts themselves and the local knowledge of automobile repair. These were both abundant resources in the developing world context, as Rosen liked to say. You didn’t have to be a trained medical technician to fix the NeoNurture; you didn’t even have to read the manual. You just needed to know how to replace a broken headlight.”¹

Is this a miracle? Let us ask all the parents whose babies are alive because of a machine like this. It is a miracle that even the smallest of towns have access to incubators and now have the ability to keep them running when they break. Each child who takes advantage of one of these units is a walking miracle.

These researchers spent years faithfully studying infant mortality in the developing world. They were open to what lies beyond the current-day understanding of how something should work. And finally, seeing the miracle, they made the machine and told the world.

They are now working on a device called “Firefly,” which is a newborn phototherapy device designed to allow rural hospitals with limited resources and inexperienced staff to successfully treat otherwise healthy newborns for jaundice. The miracle is getting

1 Steven Johnson, *Where Good Ideas Come From: The Natural History of Innovation*. 2011.

health care to the people that need it in the moment they need it. Miracles are not out of sight. These examples show that miracles are at times laying right in front of us or right within us.

I even came across an example on the Howard Stern Show. Paul Simon was talking about how three of the songs from his career were “from beyond him.” He knew that he was a conduit for a few great songs. Paul Simon used his command of music, openness to creativity and then shared these songs with the world. These three songs are: “Graceland,” “Bridge Over Troubled Waters,” and “Sound of Silence.” With

deep knowledge of music and songwriting, with openness to what is beyond us and seeing the songs through to fruition, even Paul Simon echoes the practices of Anna and Simeon from today’s story.

What about you and me? Have you seen a miracle? How do you know you have seen a miracle? Let us go back to the practices of our faith: Faithful study of God’s word, openness to the Holy Spirit’s movement, and seeing the miracles as they happen. And finally telling the world about God’s magnificent works. Only then can our God dismiss us in peace.

Alleluia and Amen.