

“How to Handle the Weight of Waiting”
Luke 2:25-40
Series: The Promise of Christmas Week 4
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You made your list, you checked it twice. Now it’s in the trash with the rest of the discarded present trimmings you tore open in a Christmas morning frenzy. What next? Self-improvement of course! Time to make promises. Time to promise ourselves we’ll do more, do better, or maybe, stop doing all together.

According to one statistics website the top five resolutions for 2107 are:

5. Staying fit and healthy.
4. Enjoy life to the fullest.
3. Spend less, save more.
2. Get organized.
1. Lose weight.

All really positive promises, but promises unfortunately, we rarely keep. In fact an estimated 45% will make resolutions but most of us will fail within a month.

Studies show that February 4th (37 days after New Year's) is the day people are most likely to fall off the wagon. This date marks an uptick in visits to fast-food joints and a downturn in trips to the gym.

Liquor and wine consumption picks up by about 40 percent in the first two weeks of February—while juice-cleanse sales drop by 25 percent. Shoppers also buy 15 percent more ice cream and desserts, and 35 percent more pizza, in early February than during the first two weeks of January.

Shelly Ridenour, "Online grocer finds New Year's resolutions last about a month," New York Post (2-21-16

I wonder if that has to do with the Superbowl?

Even so, making New Year’s resolutions is truly and age-old tradition. They can be traced back over 4,000 years to the ancient Babylonians. So, if we’ve been making resolutions for so long why are we so bad at keeping them? Or maybe the question to ponder is why do we do make them at all? Maybe it’s because we trying to reconcile the reality of how things are with how we’d like things to be. And I guess there is an expectation we should...we are expected to capitalize on this new beginning and make some lasting change. So although I am not fan of making resolutions there is an area of my life I could definitely improve upon. Waiting. I would like to be a better waiter.

Aren't we all waiting for something? Maybe you're waiting for somebody to love, or for healing in a relationship. Maybe you are waiting for job, or to graduate from high school or college. Maybe you are waiting for a loved one to forgive you or to come to a relationship with Jesus. We are all waiting for something. It's not so much what we are waiting for, but how we are waiting and who are we becoming while we wait. Periods of uncertainty can actually be a time of great personal growth.

What kind of waiter are you? To find out maybe you should take the Marshmallow test:

Basically, back in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a Stanford professor of psychology initiated a study about delayed gratification that became known as the Marshmallow Test. They took four-year-olds and put them in a room—one at a time—to meet with a psychologist, who would pull out a bag of marshmallows, take one out, and put it on the table in front of them.

It was explained to them the researcher was going to leave the room. They were told they could eat the marshmallow at any time - But, they were told – “ if you don't eat it, then when I get back, I'll give you two! But if you eat this one, it's the only one you're going to get.” Then the researcher would leave the room with the child all alone—sitting on that chair and staring at that marshmallow right in front of them on the table.

The Marshmallow Test strained the very souls of these four-year-olds, as they battled between impulse and restraint, desire and self-control, gratification and delay. Some couldn't take it and gobbled up the marshmallow as soon as the researcher left the room. Others would wait awhile then cave in.

But others developed pretty ingenious strategies for coping with the torture of not eating that marshmallow for the promise of two when the researcher came back. Some covered their eyes, so they wouldn't see the marshmallow, some folded their arms and rested their head on them. Some talked to themselves to somehow psych themselves up not to eat it, others sang to distract themselves. Some sat on their hands and some even tried to sleep. Some picked up the marshmallow and smelled it just to get as close as they could without actually eating it. It's reported that one four-year-old even licked the table all around the marshmallow, just to get a taste of it.

The heartache and angst of waiting just about killed these four-year olds in the Marshmallow Test.

How do you handle the weight of waiting?

Throughout this series, The Promise of Christmas, we've looked at the promises God made to us through the Christmas story – we saw through the story of Mary how He can lift us from discouragement and turn our upside down world right side up. Through Zechariah and Elizabeth we learned how Jesus can shine light in the darkest places of our lives when we let him in our hearts. We talked about how God pulled on skin and became human. How we can trust he's invested in us, misfits that we are, because he came in person to save us and reconcile us back to God.

Now we look at two characters in the Christmas story who you might not even have heard of. I wasn't familiar with them. When I am asked to give the message I usually look for inspiration from Pastor Doug and he graciously shares past messages he's written on whatever passage I've

been “assigned” which I did as soon as I knew I would be giving this message. And do you know what he said? I don’t have any...after 30 years in ministry, and a doctorate for heaven’s sake...not one message on Simeon and Anna!

So who are these two characters? They could almost be considered extras in the Christmas story cast. Their brief appearance is punctuated with only a few lines of dialogue- a little anti climatic after all the drama of the shepherds, the wise men and that star with a tail as big as kite dancing in the night sky. But what I learned about them is these 2 characters are model examples of how to handle the weight of waiting. They demonstrate that waiting is not incidental to faith. Waiting is the DNA of faith. And waiting has a long Biblical history:

Abraham waited twenty-five years before his wife Sarah gave birth to their first child.

Joseph suffered through thirteen years of betrayal, false imprisonment, and abandonment before becoming the leader of Egypt.

Moses spent forty years tending sheep before God called him as a deliverer of His people.

David spent fourteen years before the throne of Israel would be his.

We are introduced to Simeon and Anna at the temple, where Mary and Joseph have brought Jesus to be dedicated to God as was Jewish custom.

Luke tells us: “On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child. He was named Jesus, which the angel had given him before he was conceived.” Luke 2:21

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem 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.” Luke 2:22-24

This is important to note because it is framework for later in Jesus’s ministry – Jesus comes from a “good Jewish family” one that was careful to follow the law. So later in his ministry when he debates with religious leaders about the Law it’s not because he doesn’t respect it or follow it.

So Mary and Joseph are at the Temple with Jesus and they are approached by a man called Simeon. Luke tells us: “Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. Luke 2:25

There is some debate about his age but it is safe to say – he is an old man. And we can assume he has been waiting for a long time because “He had been told by the Holy Spirit he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Anna is a prophetess and a widow. We are told:

“She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.” Luke 2:38

So Simeon and Anna have been waiting...not passively but actively for the Messiah. And they were keeping hope alive during a time when suffering is a way of life. According to a commentary I read on Luke: “These two aged saints are Israel in miniature and Israel at its best:

devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises" (Luke, An Interpretation by Fred B. Craddock)

The Holy Spirit leads Simeon to the temple at the same time Jesus is there with Mary and Joseph. Luke writes: "Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law 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 revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

Luke 2:27-32

Simeon is offering a significant testimony about who this child really is...Simeon's inspired speech, which means it is from the Holy Spirit, is declaring Jesus to be the means of salvation for all people – Jew and Gentiles both just as God promised.

But then he speaks directly to Mary with words of warning – this baby of hers is indeed God's consolation for all people, but it will not be without great cost:

"Listen, he 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 the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'"

You have to wonder what Mary and Joseph are thinking...especially Mary. Simeon has just foreshadowed her witnessing her son Jesus' death on the cross.

Fortunately, Anna, arrives just following that cryptic statement, Luke tells us she:

"Came up at that moment and gave thanks to God and spoke about Jesus to everyone who was waiting for the redemption of Israel."

Both Simeon and Anna attest that this baby is the Kingdom God promised. But it isn't going to look like what people expected. The reality is it will involve suffering and sacrifice. And maybe that's the real reason we are so bad at keeping our resolutions. Real lasting change involves suffering and sacrifices. Sacrifices we aren't willing to make.

The New Year represents a new beginning. But it's also another new beginning's end. Jesus' life on earth brought us the miracle of the virgin birth and the start of his earthly ministry. It represents the fulfillment of prophecies that devout followers like Simeon and Anna were waiting for. The commentary on Luke puts it like this: God, through Jesus, is doing something new, but it's not really new because the new is God's keeping an old promise. As the risen Christ will later say to his disciples: "Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." Luke 24:44 (Luke, An Interpretation by Fred B. Craddock)

Through Jesus God is fulfilling the promise he first made to Abraham and then to all of us.

Remember the Marshmallow Test? The researchers ended up tracking these kids into adolescence and early adulthood. The four-year olds who were able to wait grew up to be more

socially competent, better able to cope with frustrations in life, and less likely to become rattled under pressure and stress in life. The four-year-olds who couldn't wait grew up more likely to be stubborn and indecisive, to regress or become immobilized by stress, to be resentful about not getting enough, and prone to jealousy and envy.

But what I found most interesting was a revised version of the Marshmallow test:

A 2012 study (at the University of Rochester) altered the experiment by dividing children into two groups: one group was promised something by the researcher right before the marshmallow test was conducted and that promise was broken. The second group was promised something by the researcher right before the marshmallow test was conducted and that promise was fulfilled.

The result: The group who experienced a fulfilled promise waited up to four times longer than the broken promise group for the second marshmallow to appear.

In two weeks we will resume our study of Believe with the second session called Act studying how Jesus faithfully lived his life in a purposeful way. Randy Frazee says: "If you resolve to practice what (you are about to) learn, remember you are not alone. God's spirit can give you (the) internal strength." Believe, page 171

We are going to be talking about all the things that Simeon and Anna did while they were waiting: worship, prayer, Bible study. Be resolved to get yourself to worship every Sunday, be resolved to join a Bible study, be resolved to start your day with prayer. Because when we do that we tune into the Holy Spirit just like Simeon and Anna did.

We may be waiting for loneliness to abate or a healed relationship. We may be waiting for a habit to change or a cycle of sin to be broken. We may be waiting for peace, without terrorists, bombs, and conflict, but because we believe Christ himself was resolute, firmly determined in the face of persecution, we can handle the weight of waiting. Because he never wavered or gave into temptation we can handle the weight of waiting. Because he didn't resist when we lashed his hands and feet to cross and pierced his side we can handle the weight of waiting.

Jesus death was the end of a miraculous beginning. But when he handled the weight of our sins, when he bore that weight on his shoulders and said, "It is finished." It was the beginning of something even more miraculous.

Jesus fulfilled the ultimate promise – a resolution that cost him his life. A resolution that ended the old covenant and, on the third day, began the new. A resolution he keeps not just for a day, or a week or a year – but for all eternity.