

“Now What?”

The Reverend Anna Dickson

Date: December 31, 2023



The summer I served as a student hospital chaplain in Edison, New Jersey was a hot one. It was that kind of summer when the heat hangs around you like Spanish moss hangs off of trees in Charleston, so thick you almost feel like you could get tangled in it, and when you can never seem to slake your thirst. Five of us traveled to the job together up the New Jersey turnpike every day and one morning on our way, the weatherman, much to my offense, had been as cheerful as ever as he had chirped over our car radio that we'd almost certainly hit 107 degrees by mid-afternoon. Our air conditioner had quit, so we had cracked the windows open. When we got there, the five of us drowsily peeled ourselves out of the car and rolled in like we always did, Len wiping the Jersey grime off of her glasses and Ted begrudgingly putting on a tie at the last minute.

Once those among us who relied on caffeine as much as prayers to get through that summer had iced coffees in our hands, we poured ourselves into the tiny chaplain's office to receive our lists for the day, and then we scattered to our various domains. I always started the same way – down the hall and to the left, through the Pediatric ER, then back again down the hall and into the elevator to make it to rounds in the ICU and then down the hall to another of my assigned areas, if the morning allowed for it.

On that particular morning, the elevator was slow in coming, and so when it finally did arrive, it filled quickly and to the brim with families and medical professionals. Once we were all inside and someone had punched those little light-up buttons for all of us, we heard a voice calling out to hold the elevator.

So someone stuck their arm out against the automatic door, and as it recoiled, a vortex of a man with tousled hair and a crumpled plaid shirt bounded into the elevator with us. His tan satchel, strapped diagonally across his chest, was stuffed to the gills. In his right hand, he was carrying two Jacuzzi-sized coffees, and somehow, a bag of bagels. And in his left was an empty infant carseat.

Against all hospital elevator-riding etiquette, we made eye contact. And then he glanced down at my badge and I smiled at the carseat. "It's a girl," he said. I asked when she'd been born and he told me it had been very early the day before, and that they were taking her home that afternoon. And then the words he had just spoken visibly dawned on him like the personal headline they truly were. And with an equal measure of joy and terror he looked me straight in the eye and said, "I can't believe she's ours. What are we supposed to do next?"

Perhaps it is the question that is on our minds in these days after Christmas, as we've hauled our trees to the curb and swept up the tinsel and the glitter they've left in their wake on the living room floor. *Now what?* And it *had* to have been on Joseph's mind, and Mary's, too, so many years ago. *Now what?* Now that the pageantry of Christmas had passed and day had dawned on his ramshackle birthplace, obscuring the

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twinkle of the brilliant Christmas star, and the singing of the angelic hosts was no longer ringing throughout the skies, now that those three foreign dignitaries – those wisemen – now that they have paid him homage and left their gold and their frankincense and their myrrh in a sparkling pile at the foot of the manger to return to their homes by another way, now that the shepherds had taken to the fields again to reunite with their flocks, now that the manger had been returned to its ordinary use and the animals had quieted their braying adoration of the Christ-child, *now*, when the Angel Gabriel was nowhere in sight, when it was just the three of them – Mary, and Joseph, and the infant Jesus, and the signs of Christmas had all but disappeared, you have to believe that the exhausted holy family must have looked at each other and said, *now what?*

Gabriel hadn't really given them much instruction about parenthood beyond what they were to name the child. And so, relying on the sturdy traditions of their faith to guide them, Mary and Joseph did what most pious, law-observing couples would have done in their day. They went to the Jerusalem temple to perform the ritual acts called for in the law of Moses after the birth of a child. They brought two small birds for sacrifice, in order to mark their son's birth with a sign of their willing obedience to God as parents. And the child was named and circumcised – that is, marked as a precious member of God's covenant community as so many had been before him. And Mary, who would have been ritually unclean after giving birth to her son, went to the temple to be purified as was called for in the law, so that she might rejoin the normal rhythms of worship and community and life with God along with her family. In other words, Mary and Joseph, after being swept up into months of miraculous disruption, went about the more ordinary business of faith.

But what they quickly came to find out, like my friend in the hospital elevator on that hot summer morning, was that the birth of their child had radically transformed the ordinary as they had known it. There would be no getting *back* to normal. Because of this child, theirs would be an altogether new normal. What Mary and Joseph learned that day in the temple was that the miracle of Christ's birth wasn't over. It was just beginning, and his new life brought with it hope and a future, not just for them, but for the whole of creation.

At least this was the message on the lips of the two excited strangers that met them in the temple. Can't you just see it now? We've all been around when a new baby makes his or her social debut. Babies have an innocent, but strong power to command the attention and focus of almost any room. But rarely are they scooped up and claimed by strangers as their own, a sign of God's favor specifically for *them*.

But this is precisely what Simeon does when Mary and Joseph set foot inside that temple with Jesus in tow. Now, though Luke doesn't explicitly call him one, we can be sure that Simeon was a prophet – you know, one of those people who have the gift of seeing God at work in the world, and helping others to see it, too. Simeon was a prophet who took one look at the face of the infant Jesus and saw the very face of God, right there with him, in the flesh. Immanuel. After a lifetime of waiting. After a lifetime of longing for the consolation of his people. And so scooping up the infant Lord from his mother's arms, Simeon begins to sing

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loud praises to God. “Master,” he sings, “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 the glory to your people Israel.”

And soon enough Simeon is joined by another prophet, the elderly widow Anna, who had known grief first-hand and who had spent her life hoping and longing to see the redemption of Israel. And these two elderly prophets, who while the drama of Christmas was unfolding around that manger in that far away place were in their own ordinary corners of the world waiting and hoping for the good news of great joy to reach them, together they begin to sing of God’s promised peace.

And, according to verse 33, Mary and Joseph were “*amazed* at what was being said about Jesus.”

Simeon and Anna. Two strangers. Two witnesses, who embody the hope of a whole people who had come before them, who sing about the trustworthy promises of God. Two prophets, whose words remind us a lot of those familiar words from the prophet Isaiah we hear during the season of Advent, words of comfort and hope originally addressed to a nation in exile.

Isaiah writes to the exiles, “Have you not known? Have you not heard? Those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint” (Isa. 40:28-31).

Isaiah writes, “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isa. 43:19) And we hear Simeon echoing the theme, “Master, my eyes have seen your salvation, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel. He’s really here. I can’t believe he’s ours.”

And that is, indeed, what he is. He is here, and he is ours. A light for revelation to the Gentiles, a light that the darkness cannot overcome. That was our Christmas proclamation a week ago: He is here! Light and grace. Not in some twinkly, fictional dream world. But in this one, our very real world. Mary and Joseph’s world. Simeon and Anna’s world. Our world. The same world that the apostle Paul says “has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves...[who] groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-23). Simeon and Anna proclaim that Christ has come to them, and if to them, then to us, too, and to every longing person in every ordinary corner of the world, and that, my friends, is the good news of Christmas that simply cannot be contained by December 25th, but is strong enough to carry us into a new year with hope.

By including the story of Simeon and Anna’s encounter with the Christ-child in the first two chapters of his gospel, it is almost as if Luke is taking his readers by the shoulders and begging us to open our eyes to this good news in our own time and place. “God is doing a new thing – do you not perceive it? God is a God who

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keeps promises, who remembers those who are longing for a vision of peace, who are searching for the possibility of a life that is stronger than death.

God is a God who draws near to those in need of restoration, a God whose presence means that hope is ours, for grace has been born into this world, and when grace is loose in the world, things get shaken up. The proud fall and the lowly are lifted up. And the likes of Simeon and Anna, and you, and I, are all included in the story. And Luke asks us, “Do you not yet perceive it?” This is the mysterious proclamation of our faith – what happened then is happening now, in us. It is new, and it is old, and it is a mystery, but it is sturdy, trustworthy one.

So what now? Tomorrow is the first day of a brand new year, and it follows on the heels of one that in so many different ways revealed to us the radical fragility of hope. And I won’t stand up here and presume to say what this year will bring, but I do know one thing. We go into it holding the Christ-child, a vision of a world to come already here, beginning. And makes all the difference.

May we resolve to help each other recognize this, and embrace it, and let it lead us into a whole new normal, to the glory of God. Amen.