

FACES AT THE MANGER

Anna and Simeon: The Long Road to Peace

Luke 2:25-38

December 8, 2024

In the year 2000, a man named Stuart Manley, a used bookstore owner in Northumberland, near the border of England and Scotland, was sorting through a crate of books purchased at auction when a sheet of paper folded in half at the bottom of a box caught his eye. He unfolded the paper to find a bright red poster with the crown of King George VI at the top, and below it in bold white letters words that read: *Keep Calm and Carry On*.

Stuart Manley liked the poster. He had it framed, and he hung it by the cash register in his bookstore. Only in time did he learn the story. That sign was created in 1939 by the British Ministry of Information, just prior to the Blitz, when Nazi planes flew over Great Britain every night for two months bombing London and the surrounding areas. The world had never seen anything like it: nightly air raid sirens, citizens taking shelter in basements or subway stations, the constant din of destruction, the daily death toll printed in the newspaper. The British people lived in terror for weeks on end. In preparation for the attacks they expected were coming, the government had created the posters, more than two million of them, portraying the strong resolve that undergirded Winston Churchill's leadership in crisis.

But the posters had never been distributed. And soon after the war they were all destroyed. Well... almost all of them. Six decades later, in Stuart Manley's bookshop, people began to ask about that eye-catching sign. So, he had it reproduced, and the rest is history. The original slogan and now thousands of creative variations have popped up all over the world. My personal favorite was the singlet I encountered on the Monumental Race a few weeks ago that read,

"Keep Calm...and Run a Marathon!" And then there's this one: *"Keep Calm and...Oh, Who are We Kidding?"*

In an interview several years ago, Mary Manley, Stuart's wife, described the appeal this way. She said, "The message is so simple, so clear, so without spin. '*Keep Calm and Carry On*' has turned out to have meaning not just for a single people in one time of trouble, but for all of us, everywhere, whatever our troubles."ⁱ

Keep Calm and Carry On. A statement of bold defiance in the face of tremendous adversity. An insistence that better days are coming. A charge to persist in the meantime. A message for the second Sunday in the season of Advent.

Advent is not a lengthy season. That's especially true in 2024. Just sixteen days from now we will hear the angel chorus, see the brilliant light of a shining star, feel the thrill of hope as a weary world rejoices. The trumpets will announce a new day dawning when even the power-hungry king will shudder nervously in his throne. Soon, and very soon, we will celebrate.

But there is a risk that we'll get there *too* quickly. Sometimes I wonder if we need to rescue Advent from the encroachment of Christmas. When we look to scripture's account of the birth of Jesus, we might expect to find the same kind of hectic hurry that we experience this time each year. But that's not what I read in Luke's Gospel. There is something altogether different. There is a reverence for waiting. The story is not in a rush. It lingers, giving Luke time to change lenses and zoom in on individual faces, pausing for moments of poetry that slow down the pace of the prose, perhaps inviting us to *Keep Calm and Experience Advent*.

This morning, those faces in Luke's zoom lens belong to Anna and Simeon, and you may not recall them. I will not ask for a show of hands. They don't make the Christmas pageant. They will not appear in your nativity scene. They show up too late, *after* the birth of Jesus, when he is brought to the Temple, probably on the eighth day after his birth for dedication and circumcision. So, why bring them up now? Luke's introductions reveal the answer.

First, there is Simeon. For decades, this man of God has been patiently, expectantly waiting for what Luke calls the consolation of Israel, believing a promise that he would see the Messiah before he sees death. But the truth is, that promise came a long, long time ago. We don't know how old Simeon is, but we do know he is contemplating his death, that he struggles to wait for God's redemption so that his life can finally end in peace. Then, there is Anna the prophet. Married for seven years as a girl. Widowed at a young age. Now an elderly woman of eighty-four years, Anna is a fixture in the temple. She is the consummate church lady. She never leaves. Praying, fasting, hoping, wondering, waiting.

And so, here we are, at the beginning of a story about the birth of a baby, a new day dawning. And Luke gives us these ancient voices telling old stories and singing old songs and remembering old promises. And, when Christmas comes, they are ready. These pillars of the faith are prepared. The years of their waiting have not been spent in vain. They have been an exercise in patient preparation. The waiting is not something they should have avoided, or overcome, or rushed past on the way to the *real thing*. The waiting is necessary if the gift is to be rightly received.

Anna and Simeon have something to teach us about God's gift of peace. It is not instantaneous. It does not arrive on-demand. Peace is the work of a lifetime. And the fulfillment of the promise is made sweeter by the waiting that precedes it. Simeon and Anna welcome the gift with grateful hearts and words of praise.

Waiting is hard. Spiritual waiting is challenging. When things do not happen on our schedule, we get frustrated. After all, we live in an era of instant information and same-day delivery. We tend to distrust what does not arrive immediately, including the answers to our prayers. We want faith to be as efficient as Amazon and as effective as artificial intelligence. Otherwise, what's the point?

Maybe this. Maybe waiting is a tool God uses to shape us. Simeon lived a lifetime in the hope that God would show up. And you can bet there were days he doubted. Surely he considered giving up. But somehow that vision, that promise, the Holy Spirit resting on him, would not let him quit. He kept calm and carried on. That's the only reason he's there the day Jesus is brought to the Temple in his parents' arms.

And, when the child is placed in the old man's hands, Simeon knows just what to say. He sings a hymn of praise for God's faithfulness. He speaks words of benediction for this baby and his parents.

Simeon speaks a blessing. *My eyes have seen your salvation, your light, your glory.* Simeon himself is blessed by the fulfillment of the promise. But you see, God's blessing is not an object to be possessed or a commodity to be hoarded. The wonder of God's blessing is that it only multiplies when it is shared. Like manna in the wilderness kept to ourselves, the blessing of God will rot in our hands. But offered to somebody else, it is magnified by the distribution. We are blessed to bless others with the promise of God's saving power.

Among the myriad gifts of ministry, few mean more than the privilege of offering God's blessing. We do it in times of grief and pain and in moments of joyful celebration.

In the waters of baptism. *Child of God, you belong to Jesus Christ forever.* A blessing.

At moments of commitment shared at the top of the chancel. *In plenty and in want... till death do us part.* Blessing.

And when this mortal journey has ended. *O God, receive her now into the arms of your mercy, into the glorious company of the saints in light.* Blessing.

On the journey of faith, we mark milestones and moments with words of blessing. Some of the most memorable for me are not those I have spoken, but the ones I have received. One I will never forget took place right here. The day I was installed at Second six years ago last month, our son Samuel—five years old at the time—made the sign of the cross on my forehead and spoke these words: “Bless you, Daddy.” That moment lives in my heart. I have returned to it often. You see, we’ve been through some stuff together since that service of installation in 2018. At every stage, that simple promise has sustained me. Shaped me. *Bless you, Daddy.* A promise that God’s strength is enough. Enough to *Keep Calm and Carry On.*

Simeon’s blessing does include a warning. You see, this man has lived too long to be naïve. He knows that this child, this perfect picture of God’s unconditional love, will be opposed by those who walk in darkness and despise the light. Painful days lie ahead. There will be violence and hatred. There will be corruption and a cross. But somehow the blessing spoken will persist. Truth crushed to the earth will rise again. And so, old Simeon can now depart this life in peace.

Peace. That’s the word today. It’s what Simeon waited his whole life to experience. And now, the promise secured, the child held in his hands, Simeon will die in peace.

But the journey goes on. The long road to peace lies ahead for us. You see, the blessing of the baby is only the beginning. It will be given away. It *must* be given away if it is to survive. And that is your call this season and in the time to come. There are those among us in desperate need, and they belong to us. We belong to them. As you wait, share this blessing. *Keep Calm and Carry On the Work of Peace.* Amen.

ⁱ Chicago Tribune, March 21, 2009.