

The days after Christmas Day always have a unique feel to them. For four weeks in Advent, the Church focuses on Christ's coming and waiting for that, and then Christmas Day arrives, and we rejoice that God did come to earth, just as He had promised. In the days after, we continue to rejoice, but we also know that the Christmas season will be over soon, and the decorations will go away, and we'll continue on with the yearly cycle.

The big event has come, and yet we're still waiting. It's this tension of "now, and now yet" that we find ourselves in. This is a tension in which the Church has waited since the birth of Jesus two millennia ago. But as the Scriptures reveal, while we wait in this tension, we wait in confidence, for, as Simeon declares, our eyes have beheld the Salvation of our God.

Simeon is a picture of this waiting. At some point in his life, he is given a wonderful promise from God. We read, "And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." Talk about something to look forward to!

All Israel had been waiting for the coming of the Christ, the Messiah, the One whom God had promised to send to save His people. The Christ would bring consolation – comfort – to Israel, and Simeon is guaranteed that he will get to see Him with his very own eyes! And so, Simeon waits, and he watches, looking for the Christ.

We're not told in the Scriptures how long Simeon waited, but the feeling you get, especially in how Simeon's story is connected to the elderly prophetess Anna, is that Simeon waited quite a while. Years go by, decades even, and Simeon is waiting, and looking.

If Simeon told anyone the promise the Lord had given to him, they probably thought he was mistaken, or crazy, especially as time goes on. And no doubt Simeon was attacked by doubt as he waited. Had God really said what Simeon thought He said? Had he understood God's words correctly? Was he just fooling himself – and making a fool out of himself?

Yet against these doubts, God the Holy Spirit sustained Simeon's faith. The Spirit led Simeon to the temple, week after week, to hear again and again the promises of God in the Scriptures and again again how God had been faithful in keeping those promises. The Holy Spirit, dwelling in this righteous and devout man, granted him the strength to wait, and wait in faith, for however long it took.

And then, on the day appointed by the Lord in ages past, Joseph and Mary bring the infant Jesus to the temple to offer the sacrifices required in the Law. And Simeon, there in the temple, still faithfully looking for the promised Christ, is told by the Holy Spirit, "That's Him!" There, in the arms of a young woman, watched over by a faithful man, is the Christ.

The day Simeon has waited for so long has finally arrived! Simeon beholds the Promised One with his very own eyes, just as the Lord had promised that he would. And because faith always desires more of God, Simeon excitedly goes over to the Holy Family and asks if he can hold the baby. No

doubt confused, though not scared by this warm, smiling figure, Joseph and Mary hand over the forty-day-old baby into Simeon's arms.

At this point, Simeon's smile grows even larger, perhaps accompanied by tears of joy, and he, like Mary and Zechariah before him, breaks into a song of praise to God, the song we now call the Nunc Dimittis.

Led by the Holy Spirit, devout Simeon praises God for the peace granted to him. He testifies that the Child he holds is the salvation of God, the One who will reveal God to the nations, the glory of the people of Israel – the reason why they were set apart.

In addition, Simeon blesses the parents, and prophesies that the Child will cause great changes in Israel, and in the lives of his earthly parents. Both Mary and Joseph have heard from angels what their child, Jesus, will do, and yet they still marvel, likely not having anticipated all these events unfolding during a somewhat routine visit to the temple.

Joining the excitement is Anna, a prophetess. Here we are given another picture of waiting on God. She was only married for seven years when her husband died, leaving her a widow at a young age. For decades, she has been in the temple, worshiping, fasting, and praying. We aren't told that she was given a specific, direct promise like Simeon, but nevertheless she is doing what God's people have done for countless ages – wait upon the deliverance of the Lord.

Like Simeon, she too has been hearing the Word, praying to the Lord, looking to Him to care for her needs. And then, on that day, she too is led to the Word made flesh. Seeing the Christ-child, she breaks into thanksgiving and begins telling anyone and everyone that here is the One who will redeem Jerusalem. Many have been looking for this redemption, and Anna now joyfully declares that it is at hand, that the One whom Malachi prophesied would come suddenly to His temple had now arrived.

That day was without a doubt the best day of Simeon and Anna's earthly lives. They had got to see with their eyes, even hold in their arms, the Savior, the promised Christ. But then, Simeon must give Jesus back to Mary. The One who will redeem Jerusalem as Anna said must go back to Nazareth. And everyone's lives go on. Simeon and Anna return to their day-to-day existence.

It's a noteworthy point that, as this reading begins, everyone is waiting, and then the great event happens, and then at the end... everyone is again waiting. Simeon, having now seen the Lord's Christ, is waiting for the day when he will see death. Anna and those waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem have seen the Redeemer, but are still waiting for that redemption. Joseph and Mary, who have heard incredible words concerning their baby, return to the humble life of a carpenter's family, waiting for the day when they see those words come to fruition.

The day has come, the day has gone, and now the tension of waiting is there once more.

But it's not just a return to how things were before Jesus' arrival at the temple. It's true, everyone is again waiting, but now they wait in great confidence. What has happened is used by the Holy Spirit to grow their faith. The Lord had kept His promises concerning that day, which in turn increased their trust that He would keep His promises of things still to come.

Simeon waits, but he waits knowing that he is delivered from the death that is coming. He has held the Lord's Christ in his arms; he has seen the Salvation sent by God for the whole world – which includes himself. He knows that he may depart this life in peace, because he has watched the peace offering of God Himself be brought into the temple.

Anna likewise waits. She doesn't immediately get to witness the redemption of Jerusalem, but she has seen the One sent by God who accomplish it, and she knows that God cannot and does not fail. The Child must go back to Nazareth and, as part of His state of humiliation in becoming a true man, grow in strength and wisdom.

And Anna will have died before He returns years later to redeem Jerusalem by hanging on a cross outside it. But as she closed her eyes in death, she knew by faith that she was redeemed. She, like Simeon, could depart in peace, for she had witnessed God fulfill His word that day in the temple.

The confident waiting of Simeon and Anna is the waiting which the Church has endured for all these centuries since then. The first coming of Christ and all He did for His people is one of the greatest periods of time in our earthly history.

For millennia, God's people waited and waited, and then the Christ came! He was born as a man, one of us, enduring all our temptations and troubles. He shed His blood for us, washing away our sins and purchasing for us an eternal inheritance in His Father's kingdom. He rose again, showing in His glorified flesh that He truly had conquered the grave. And He ascended into heaven, taking up once more His almighty power to rule over all things for the sake of His Church.

Fulfilling yet another promise, He poured out His Spirit upon His disciples at Pentecost. The Spirit then led the disciples to proclaim the glorious Gospel to Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria, and to the very ends of the earth. As with the day Simeon beheld the Christ, Christ's time on earth, where His disciples saw and touched Him, was a truly incredible time.

But then Christ ascended, and Pentecost came and went, and the Church entered a new period of waiting, waiting for her Lord to come again from heaven and bring her to Himself. The wait has been a long one, roughly two thousand years and counting.

And the wait has been a hard one. Very often, it was persecution that spread Christians into the world. The witness of Christians was often found not only in their words but in the laying down of their lives. An early church father named Tertullian, is quoted as saying, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

And this wasn't true only in ancient times. Just last week, on Christmas, Jihadists in Nigeria killed over 140 Christians, injuring hundreds more, and burning down hundreds of homes. Still today, the Church suffers as she waits. She sees her members killed, watches other lured away by the pleasures of the world, and all the while is attacked as backward, ignorant, and foolish. The doubts that attacked Simeon and Anna during their long wait having attacked God's people of every age.

Yet just as God's Spirit and word of promise sustained those two saints, the Spirit and the Word sustain the Church as she waits still.

The Spirit led Simeon to go to the temple; the Spirit gathers together God's people into the holy Christian Church. Simeon had been given the promise that he would not see death before he beheld the Lord's Christ; the Church is given the promise from Christ Himself that the gates of hell will not prevail over her, that she will still be found on this earth when He comes again in glory. Simeon was given peace as he held Christ in his arms; the Church throughout the world is given peace where she holds the very body and blood of Christ as she celebrates the Lord's Supper.

In these things, the Church is sustained now and in every age. Because she has beheld her Lord, she is given confidence that she is not left alone. The Lord Jesus did not lay down His life for His bride just to abandon her later. No, He has won for Himself a people for His own possession, and He will return to claim them.

This is why the church year has Advent and then Christmas. We don't celebrate the birth of our Lord for nostalgia's sake. No, we celebrate because the fact that He has come once guarantees that He will come again. Christmas adds to our confidence as we wait for His return.

The wait isn't just felt by the Church as a whole, either. It's something experienced by each and every individual Christian. The beginning of your life as a Christian is marked by an incredible event: Holy Baptism.

There, according to God's word and God's power, you were born again, born from above, by water and Spirit. The Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – put His name on you, making you a member of His everlasting family. You were given life from the very light and life of all men – the Son of God Himself. In Baptism, God the Father becomes your Father, God the Son becomes your Brother, God the Holy Spirit makes your body into His temple. Your Baptism is truly the beginning of a whole new life for you.

And yet, you have to wait to see the complete fulfillment of that life. The reality of being a Christian is one lived in that waiting tension of "now and not yet." As you wait, it will feel very long, taking up perhaps almost all of your earthly life.

And not only will it be long, it will be hard. You will have days where the words of Job are your words: "Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble." Every part of our lives is touched by sin, and therefore every part of our lives is subject to problems.

Through these years, which even Moses declares to be toil and trouble, doubts will come, temptations to think that God's promises aren't for you, or that you'll never see them completed. Where is your redemption? When will you see the New Jerusalem, as Anna looked for?

It's in these times that hearing again and again the promises of God in the Word renew and strengthen your faith. God has made you His own, therefore, "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." God gives daily bread even to the unrighteous; will He fail to provide for His own children? No! As Christ says, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"

Would the Lord ever not give you what He knows is best for you? No! He tells you in His word, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Does God love you? Of course He does! Look at the cross and hear the words of Him who there died for you: “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”

There on the cross, you see that God’s Word is not just words. It is action. It has substance. This is seen in the miracle that is Holy Communion. There, like Simeon, you actually hold the body of Jesus in your hands. There, you drink the blood of the New Covenant for the forgiveness of your sins. In the Supper, you behold the salvation of God with your own eyes, just as Simeon did.

It’s no mere symbol. It’s God humbling Himself once more and coming again and again to His people, just as He promised. He tells you, “This is my body.” It’s the body that died, rose again, and will be seen in glory at the Last Day. In the Supper, God physically comes to His people and strengthens their faith, just as He physically came to Simeon and strengthened his faith.

As Christians, we are in a season of waiting. But our God has come to us, and continues to come to us in His Word and His flesh.

When we leave His table, we sing the words which the Holy Spirit inspired in Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis, because they are just as true for us today as they were for him two thousand years ago. Our eyes have beheld the very salvation of God. We have held the glory of Israel in our hands. We have seen the light which reveals truth to the Gentiles. And so we can depart, from this table, and even from this life itself, in peace.

May our Lord hasten the day when we will see the fullness of His Consolation and be brought as the redeemed into the New Jerusalem.

In Jesus’ name, amen.