

## December 4, 2011 - Stand Up - Stand Still

We are starting a new series this morning. It's going to run for just a couple of weeks and what we want to try and do with this series is put ourselves in the shoes of some of the people who were there to witness the birth of Christ and who were there when God made his arrival on earth and began to dwell among us.

And so, part of how we are going to do that, I've been looking for volunteers who are going to help us. This morning we had two volunteers who did a very good job for us, putting us in the shoes of Simeon and Anna. I'm looking for further volunteers for next week and the week after who would do something similar. All you really have to do is, I will give you the passage of scripture that is the story for that person and all I want you to do is just kind of read that and think about that and spend some time wondering "How would I feel if I was that person and this was my experience. We'll give you a couple minutes to come up here and share that with all the rest of us who haven't maybe had the time to sit down and think about those things. If you would be willing to take one of the four spots I have left. Thus far, the ladies have been much more eager to volunteer, so I'll put the challenge out to the men to stand up and volunteer for some of those spots, as well. Please talk to me afterwards if you are willing to take on some of that and help us get into the shoes of some of these people.

It's hard to believe that it is December already. Does anyone feel that same way, think, there's no possible way it's anywhere past Labour Day or something. It just feels incredible that Christmas is just around the corner and we're into December. I heard the first Christmas songs on the radio and now they're on all the time and the lights are up. I finally got my lights up yesterday which is about a month later than I'd like to have done it cause it was really cold standing up on the ladder hanging the lights. But, you know, they say "Tis the Season" right? I know the official phrase from the song is "Tis the Season to be Jolly", but I see lots of people using this same phrase for lots of things. I saw one poster which said "Tis the Season for Savings". Then I saw another sign that said "Tis the Season to Spend Money" and I think they were going for the same motivation with both of those signs. People use this phrase and adopt it for a lot of things. So, this morning, I thought I would do the same things. If I was to finish this phrase, I could probably do it in a lot of ways, but I think the one thing I would pick this morning as I think about this season is "Tis the Season to Wait". I don't know if you've thought about it this way but as I consider the things that go on at this time of year I find that I am compelled and forced to do a lot of waiting for things at this time of year. For example, many of you may have had this experience. Have any of you had to wait for a parking spot to open up as you drive around and they're all full? Maybe you've had to wade through shoppers and wait your turn to get down the aisle to get that thing that you're looking for and after you've finally found it you get the pleasure of waiting in line to pay for it. I think the fellow at the front there, his expression explains exactly how I feel in those situations as I stand waiting in line to pay for my purchases. Perhaps the most notable place to wait is in the line-up to get your photo with Santa Clause. Sometimes those lines can be very long and especially if

you're holding children that are not as good at waiting as adults tend to be. That line can seem very long but it's well worth it because once you get up to the front you get your beautiful, joyful, loving, picture. (Picture of Harrison and Sawyer crying). Actually my favourite thing about this picture, obviously Harrison's expression, but take a look at Santa's face. There's a guy who is waiting for the end of his shift and is looking forward to that quite anxiously.

I heard this week, something odd to me and I think this is for those who are tired of waiting in line to get their picture to Santa, at the Eaton's Centre in Toronto this year, instead of doing the Santa and the pictures and the whole thing, they've gone a different route and instead, you can book an appointment to skype with Santa. So instead of going and sitting on his knee you go and sit at a table and look at the computer monitor and talk to Santa live at the North Pole. I guess that get's rid of the waiting but it's just doesn't have the same feeling to it quite as much.

I don't know, it seems like there's a lot of things about the holidays that make us wait and are involved with waiting. I don't know what you're waiting for this holiday season. Perhaps you're waiting to get to be away from work for a little while. Maybe you're waiting for all of the goodies and cookies and treats and maybe some of you aren't actually waiting for that anymore because you kind of snuck in a little bit already. Maybe you're waiting for the big Christmas dinner and the turkey and the stuffing and all those things. Maybe you're waiting for the presents and that stuff. A lot of people at this time of year are waiting for the family time and to be together with family or friends. Some people are waiting for all the family to get together, some people are waiting for all the family to go home again after they're been there for a week or more. Whatever it is you're waiting for this year, there is that kind of sense of anxiousness and anticipation and longing for things to arrive.

Each year, my kids have got into liking the Advent calendars, where you open the door and get the little chocolate square each morning. This year, their cousins sent them a special gift and this was the Christmas gift, instead of chocolate ones, they got Lego Advent calendars so each day they open up the box and they get this little thing they put together and they're very excited about that. The only problem was, it arrived in the mail, like 3 weeks ago and we told them about it and they saw it. They were very excited about it, but every day they said "Can we start opening it now?" We said "No you have to wait until December 1<sup>st</sup>, that's when it starts." "How long is that." "Well, that's about 14 more days." "Okay". The next day, "Can we open it now?" "No we can't, you have to wait until December 1<sup>st</sup>, that's 13 days." And so, finally this week they were very excited on the first morning when they got to open the first box of their Advent Calendar.

Have you ever had to wait for something? Perhaps wait for a long time? There are some things that we wait months and years for. One of the most intense moments of waiting that I've had to experience all at once, not necessarily all at once, but the focus of the experience was going across the Border. If you've gone across the Border here in Saskatchewan, you've gone down to Estevan or wherever, and gone across the Border. You have no idea what a

blessing you have to be doing that because we used to live in Vancouver for awhile and we would take trips down to Washington and when we went across the Border, what we saw often times, unless you went in the middle of the night, you would see something like this when you got to the Border. There's a line-up of three lanes just packed full. What you need to understand about this picture, is right there, that's the Canadian flag, because this is the Canadian end of the Border crossing. The American end of the Border crossing is a kilometre past that. If you were going down into the States you would have to pick the right time or you would be there for an hour, or an hour and a half or sometimes two hours or more. Just sitting in your car, waiting, waiting, then move forward one car length then wait and wait. So, that experience of sometimes being forced to wait so long, I guess sometimes waiting can heighten your anticipation for awhile, but eventually as you're sitting in that lane of cars, you start to wonder "How much do I really want to go down to Washington today?" "Is it really going to be worth what I'm getting at the end to sit here and endure all of this waiting."

Well, the Israelites knew a few things about waiting. The Israelites were waiting for something very specific and all of them, were waiting for it and anticipating it and longing for it and looking for it and searching for it and just couldn't wait for it any longer. You see, the Israelites had been waiting for hundreds and hundreds of years for this very special thing. And over those hundreds and hundreds of years there have been some tough times and there have been some rather ugly times and in fact, a lot of those hundreds and hundreds of years they had spent either in exile or under oppression or being mistreated or being conquered. So there were a lot of really hard times they went through while they were waiting. What they were waiting for was for the Messiah to come. When they thought of the Messiah coming, what they thought of was God's promise that at some point, He would send someone to save Israel, to redeem the Country. What they were thinking of was the return of a David-like figure. What they were thinking that whoever would come would return Israel to whatever they had during the reign of David. While David was King, Israel had advanced their borders to their furthest point and it had become the strongest military power than it had ever been. It had become more prosperous than it had ever been in other years and David had designed the Temple and Solomon built the Temple and the Temple that Solomon built was so grand and so magnificent and even though it had been destroyed and rebuilt, this one that they had now wasn't as great as the original one. So they were looking for someone to come back and redo all that and bring back all that glory and all that splendour. They were looking for someone who would bring them back to the point where they were God's people and the Lord was their God and where God was present and He was on their side and He was right there and everything was the way that it was meant to be.

As we enter the New Testament that is not where we are at. They are still waiting and they are under Roman rule and they are being oppressed and they are being taxed and they are being lorded over by puppet rulers and Roman bureaucrats and every little tiny hint of an uprising is crushed by Rome in dramatic fashion just to send a message to anyone else who might dare lift their hand against the Empire. And so, it's in that kind of a context that the Israelites would

hold fast to the verses like the one out of Isaiah 9:6-7, and I would imagine they would have this on posters on their wall and they would crochet it or cross stitch it on their pillows. This was their John 3:16. It's verses like this out of Isaiah 9:6-7:

“For unto us a child is born. To us a Son is given and the government will be on His shoulders and He will be called” (listen if you can hear the longing in these calls) “He will be called Wonderful Counsellor; Mighty God; Everlasting Father; Prince of Peace and the increase of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over His Kingdom establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness. From that time on and forever the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

You see, everyone in Israel is waiting and watching and anticipating and longing for the arrival of the Messiah. And that's what brings us to our story that was read out of Luke, Chapter 2, this morning. Let's set the stage just a little bit. When we come to the story that was read earlier about Simeon and Anna, obviously Jesus has already been born at this point. It's probably about 40 days later that Mary and Joseph and Jesus come to the Temple. They're there for a couple of purposes. One is, because Jesus was the oldest son, they were required to give a special sacrifice at the Temple for the eldest son being born. But also, Mary, because she had had a baby had to come and offer a sacrifice of her own for purification at the Temple. So, it's about 40 days after Jesus was born. So try and picture a baby that's about a month old and that's where Jesus was at, at that point. When they offer their sacrifice, just kind of as a side note to give you some insight. The sacrifice they offer, Mary offers, is two doves and that was one of the two options for a sacrifice. If you were a little more affluent or wealthy, you would bring a lamb. But if you were less wealthy, if you were a little more on the poor side, you would bring the two doves. And so, you get this picture of Mary and Joseph and they're just starting out and Joseph was a carpenter and he makes a living but it's not a great living. They're coming together, this small family, starting out, coming to the Temple to offer their sacrifices to God.

In the Temple, they meet Simeon and Anna. Simeon and Anna are very similar characters and they are very curious and wonderful people. You see, Simeon, it says, is devout and righteous. And Anna, it says “She never left the Temple day and night but stayed worshipping and praising God.” Simeon, several times Luke says that Simeon was led by the spirit. And on the other hand, he calls Anna a ‘prophetess’. They were both quite old and aged and they had both been waiting for a long time for this one specific event--to see the Messiah. And that tells me something special about God. It tells me, as I read the story about Simeon and Anna, is that “God's heart is with the waiting”. You see, the day that we read about the day in Luke, Chapter 2, where Simeon and Anna see Mary and Joseph and Jesus, that is a wonderful day. That is a glorious day for them. But there was a lot of other days that came before that day. There were days when hopes grew dim. Days when faith would waiver. There were days when doubt crept in. There were days when weariness took over. But God had remained close to them, each and every step of the way and that is good news for those who are waiting.

Some of you are waiting this morning. Some of you are thinking “Maybe this is the year that my waiting will end.” “Maybe this is the year that I will find Mr. Right.” “Maybe this is the year that Mr. Not Quite Right will finally get his act together.” “Maybe this is the year that I will get out of debt.” “Maybe this is the year that I will finally lose those pounds.” “Maybe this is the year that I can afford to buy a house.” “Maybe this is the year that I will find God, or maybe my kids will find God.” “Maybe this is the year that I will figure out who I really am.” “Maybe this is the year that I will finally get a decent job.” “Maybe this is the year that I will be happy.” And as much as you embrace the hope of “Maybe this will be the year” many of us know the frustration and the hurt and anxiety when another year passes and you realize that this wasn’t the year and the thing you hope for still hasn’t come. The message of the story is, during those years, during those months, during those days and hours, God walks with the waiting. Isaiah says in Isaiah 40: 28-31:

“Do you not know? Haven’t you heard? The Lord is the Everlasting God creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary and His understanding, no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary. He increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk, and not be faint.”

The thing that strikes me as curious about this story is, after all this long period of waiting, I always wonder how when Mary and Joseph and Jesus came to the Temple, how did Simeon know that Jesus was the One that he was looking for? A lot of the pictures that we see of this meeting are kind of like this one, but in real life, there was no beam of light that shone down on Jesus. There was no halo around His head. Jesus looked like a baby. Any other, 40 day old baby. In fact, Isaiah says as he writes about Jesus coming, he says in Isaiah 53:1-2:

“Who has believed this message and from whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before him like a tender shoot and like a root out of the dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”

In other words, Isaiah says he looked just like an ordinary person. He looked like an ordinary person, he acted like an ordinary person. He was an ordinary 40 day old baby that did 40 day old, baby things. He slept and he ate and he spit up, he had diapers to change. He was an ordinary baby. So how on earth did Simeon and Anna know that this was the “One”. Well, somehow in all of that, even though there was no beam of light following Jesus around, Simeon and Anna still recognized God at work. Out of the hundreds and thousands of babies and boys that might have been brought to the Temple each month or year, how would they know that this is the one? Well, let me put it to you this way. Do you recognize anyone on that screen? (Pictures of babies born in the congregation.) Now there are some up there, who you will probably recognize. There are some up there who you will probably will not. The

difference between the ones you will recognize and the ones you do not, are, the ones you recognize them, you've seen them. You've seen them running around here on Sunday morning. You see them over and over, week after week and your recognition of them is based on your past experience with them. Some of you might even be able to recognize them because you see their mom or their dad in their face and you say "Oh, that must be so and so's kid, because they've got his eyes or her ears or her smile, or whatever." But, recognition comes from previous experience.

Have you ever watched a T.V. show and you're watching this T.V. show and as soon as a character steps onto the screen and walks out, he hasn't said a line, he hasn't done anything, but as soon as he steps on, you know. He did it. He's the bad guy. How do you know that. Well because, he's been in other shows and every time he's the bad guy so as soon as he walks out you know. He's the bad guy. Recognition is based on previous experience. You see, Simeon and Anna had a whole lot of previous experience with God. Simeon had a close relationship with God. It says actually that the Spirit led him to the Temple that day. I don't know exactly how that worked. I don't know if he heard a voice or if he just felt a leading, or if ...I don't know what got him there but it says "the Spirit led him to the Temple." The fact is that the more time you spend with God and talking to God and listening to God and looking for God, the easier it's going to be to see and hear Him. Anna, the same thing. It says she spent all day and night at the Temple worshiping and praying. If you're at the Temple worshiping and praying and praising God day and night, I have a pretty good hunch you're going to recognize Him when He shows up.

The Psalmist instructs us, or challenges us to "be still and know that I am God." Psalm 46:10a.

James says in James 4:8a:

"Come near to God and He will come near to you."

You see the more time we spend with God the easier it is for us to see Him and work around us.

All of Israel had been desperately longing; patiently waiting; eagerly anticipating the Messiah. Many people missed it because they didn't know God well enough to recognize Him when He stood right in front of their eyes. Many people rejected and attacked the very One they had been waiting and longing for. But Simeon and Anna knew what God at work, looked like.

I wonder, how often is God busy in my life and I don't see it, simply because I don't recognize Him. For Simeon and Anna the waiting wasn't just something to be endured before the important stuff happened. It wasn't just time to kill. For Simeon and Anna the waiting was time to get to know God better, so that when He showed up and began to work, they wouldn't miss it.

So, whether you are waiting for something to start, or to end, to come or to go, to increase or decline, to appear or to be forgotten, you can wait with the comfort of knowing that God walks with you while you are waiting. You can wait with the confidence that if you draw near to God in your waiting you will better recognize His work in your life. God is about to do something worth waiting for. Do you sense it? Do you feel the anticipation? Are you pulled in by the longing? Perhaps you say, "I don't feel that. Today is just another day like any other day." Well, so was the day before Simeon and Anna met the Messiah. What are you waiting for? Are you waiting and walking with God? And when He arrives, will you notice it?