

Scripture:
Luke 2:22-40

“Discernment.”

Discernment is a fine example of a great theological word.

And like many theological words it’s a word we don’t often hear.

It’s one of those great and power packed words ---- like reconciliation --- redemption --- covenant --- salvation --- that speaks to our life of faith and seem to have been constructed for the sole purpose of faith talk.

Discernment.

What exactly does it mean to discern ---- or be discerning?

A few examples.

The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms ---- defines discernment in this way ----- saying that it’s ----- “The process of assessing and evaluating ----- particularly in relation to trying to determine God’s will in a particular situation or for one’s life direction.”

“The process of assessing and evaluating, particularly in relation to trying to determine God’s will...”

Another definition might go something like ----- “demonstrating good judgment or insight in terms of what God wants ---- in terms of God’s will.”

Or ----- we might define discernment in this way ----- “being able to decipher God’s will and not get sidetracked by personal wants and desires.”

Or ----- “the ability to hone in on God’s will in a given situation ---- or more broadly ---- in any given situation.”

Whatever words we choose --- however we might define it ---- discernment is essentially ----- “good judgment and insight into God’s will in a specific situation.”

“Good judgment and insight into God’s will.”

Well today in Luke’s gospel I think it’s fair and accurate to say that we have 2 prime examples ---- 2 quintessential examples even ----- of faithful discerners.

Simeon and Anna are 2 perfect examples of honing in on --- and using good judgment and insight with regards to the will of God.

Simeon ---- verses 25-32 from Luke’s gospel reading today.

“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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

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 for glory to your people Israel."

Talk about a life of discernment --- attending to God’s will.

God told Simeon that he would see --- with his own eyes --- in his lifetime -- --- the Messiah who would fulfill God’s will.

You can well imagine Simeon at the temple in Jerusalem --- and in and around Jerusalem in general --- with eyes wide open ---- attentive ---- hawk eyed ----- constantly on the look out for God’s salvation --- the arrival of the Messiah.

And you can well imagine that whenever a child was presented at the Temple for purification --- there Simeon would be ----- attentive --- discerning God’s will --- looking to see if this child was the one --- the one to bring consolation and salvation as God so promised.

Now Simeon was likely rather old --- “you can now dismiss your servant in peace” --- he says to God in verse 29 ----- he had likely waited quite some time for this day.

It had been a long ---- hard time ---- for Simeon --- waiting attentively day after day after day.

But long and hard and trying as it must have been ---- Simeon somehow remained focused and in tune with God’s will.

Eyes --- heart ----- mind --- and spirit wide open ready --- forever seeking to come face to face with the child that God promised.

Oh that we would all have the keen desire --- and sharp attentiveness that Simeon had.

Oh that we would all discern --- have faith in God’s timing as Simeon did.

Imagine a man spending much of his days in the birthing unit of the local hospital ----- going everyday and looking in on the new borns ---- hoping to see someone particularly special and gifted ---- destined for great things.

And then one day --- when he was very old --- it happens --- and jumping up and grabbing one of the children he says something like ---- “This one will be bright and powerful --- he’ll be the prime minister one day” --- and then he simply turns ---- puts the child down and walks away.

Charges would be laid ---- by the parents --- by the hospital --- this guy lost it for a minute there didn’t he?

Well ---- that’s kind of like what happened in Luke’s gospel today.

Put another way --- it would have been like Simeon sat in the back pew of the church year after year ---- worshipping and praising and praying to God - --- waiting.

And over the years as children were brought forth for baptism and blessing he one day suddenly jumps up in the middle of the sacrament ----- takes the child away from the pastor ---- and holds the child up saying --- “This is the

one --- this is the one God told me about ---- this is the one who will be the next great preacher and pastor ---- this is the one we've been waiting for.”

And then goes back and sits down and lets the minister finish the service.

It would have been that dramatic --- the day Simeon took Jesus in his hands at the temple.

And of course it was far more binding and powerful because it wasn't just the next prime minister or pastor preacher ----- but the Saviour of the world that Simeon held up.

Simeon --- patient --- at peace --- gathering with others at the temple to worship.

Simeon ---- faithful discerning one.

And now what about Anna the prophet --- another faithful discerner.

Anna is particularly interesting to me because not only was she a prophet --- and there aren't too many people referred to as prophets in the New Testament and of course she was a woman --- and there aren't a whole lot of female prophets listed in scripture.

Indeed it's rare for there to be so little said of one explicitly referred to as a prophet as Anna is in verse 36 from Luke's gospel today.

Curious that we have so little to go on about her.

Anna ---- remarkable woman --- a woman who suffered --- a widow ---- who like Simeon was long of tooth --- and had been around a while ---- waiting -- ---- and waiting ---- and waiting on God.

Like Simeon she was faithful ---- like Simeon she was discerning --- and like Simeon she was often found in and around the temple and its courts.

“She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying” --- verse 37 says.

Like Simeon ---- Anna ---- devoted her whole life to God.

Clearly that's what was so important about this prophet --- not what she said ----- but what she did ----- waiting on --- attending --- discerning God's will as she prayed and worshipped and gathered at the Temple.

Remarkable people these two ----- Anna and Simeon if you ask me.

Remarkable enough --- in the case of Anna ---- for Kate and I to incorporate her into the name of our daughter.

If we want to know what discernment looks like ---- we need look no further than these two.

Simeon and Anna both believed in a quiet life of prayer --- worship and watchfulness ----- until God should act.

All their lives they waited quietly and patiently upon God --- suffering through long periods of doubt and questioning no doubt.

Simeon prayed --- and worshipped.

In humble and faithful anticipation and expectation he attended on the day when God would provide the long awaited comfort for His people.

I came across this quote this week --- a quote that speaks to the steady patient waiting and discerning that so characterizes Simeon and Anna --- and it's a good one.

It goes this way ----- "The church continues to witness and interpret what God has done and will do ----- just as Simeon and Anna waited for ----- and interpreted the Messiah."

"The church continues to witness and interpret what God has done and will do ----- just as Simeon and Anna waited for and interpreted the Messiah."

Notice that Simeon and Anna weren't off on a solitary nature hike or personal quest of freedom of expression when they experienced God's revelation.

Although that can happen too ----- it didn't --- at least not on this day.

Two people who had spent so much of their time ---- in community --- at the temple --- within the great cloud of witnesses that was their church --- experience God most profoundly there side by side with other faithful believers.

This tells us something.

This tells us something that much of our generation has forgot or neglected.

And it doesn't tell us that God speaks most clearly only at church.

As true as that may be for some --- the message from Luke's gospel today isn't that you need to be in the church for God to act and speak and reveal Himself.

What it does say though ----- is that those who worship --- and gather in community to worship --- those who pray --- those who attend on God --- diligently year in and year out --- like Anna and Simeon did --- will eventually hear and see and experience God acting in ways that others likely will not.

What it does say is that those who discern --- and attend --- on God --- will indeed find Him ---- eventually ---- as promised.

What it does say is that those who worship --- and pray --- those who show up at the temple ---- at church --- at the place where other believers go ---- and gather together will be blessed with discernment ---- will have "good judgment and insight into God's will."

Simeon and Anna ---- demonstrate their gift of discernment in the context of community.

That tells us something ---- or at least ought to.

It tells us that discernment ---- the ability to make God inspired decisions is cultivated in the context of community --- because these 2 great discerners were also 2 great community people.

And of course there's more.

There's also ---- endurance --- and faithfulness --- and stick to it-ness.

Discernment requires patience ---- patient resolve.

In a society like ours that craves for --- and much of the time is given -----
- instant gratification ---- things that refuse to resolve quickly often frustrate.

Luke's gospel today shows us 2 people in Simeon and Anna ---- who both endure --- and wait --- and attend --- and discern --- for a very very long time.

There was no instant gratification --- or even quick gratification for Simeon and Anna.

And Luke shows us how they found their patience and their great sense of trust in God.

For Simeon it was through the presence and blessing of the Holy Spirit --- and for Anna it was through prayer and worship.

So ----- what exactly can we learn from this brief little encounter at the temple?

First of all what stands out front and centre is that when we find ourselves in a situation of long duration that requires patience ----- we can take comfort in the presence of the Holy Spirit and in acts of prayer and worship.

Simply put we can take great comfort when faced with long periods of waiting --- because we know that God will answer --- and God will follow through.

Anna and Simeon basically waited their whole lives for this one moment in time ----- a couple of minutes at the temple.

It would seem that their whole reason for being was to be able to discern this one moment in time --- this little 40 day old baby Jesus being presented at the Temple ----- and nothing else.

If we ever come to mistakenly think that the only ---- or prime way that God shows power and love is through acting quickly and decisively ----- Anna and Simeon remind us that very often God sustains us in long --- sometimes very long periods of waiting.

Clearly Anna's was a very long and a very lonely vigil.

But she persevered.

Anna was a widow --- as verse 37 says.

And one thing we know about widows they have all experienced sorrow --- the loss of a loved one --- the loss of the one they love the most ---- their partner in life.

And yet she didn't grow bitter --- sorrow can make us bitter --- resentful --- rebellious ---- or sorrow can make us kinder --- more compassionate --- more understanding of human suffering than before.

Sorrow --- suffering --- pain --- a yearning desire for respite in the face of challenges ---- can either take away our faith --- temporarily or for some permanently --- or --- it can root us deeper in faith.

Clearly Anna was rooted deeper.

Anna and Simeon were both waiting and attending --- anticipating the difference that Jesus would make in the world.

Like Isaiah and others before him ----- they too looked forward to the changes that Jesus would bring ----- as do all Christians.

In Christ we reject any kind of belief or understanding that assumes the status quo is permanent.

Anna knew her sorrow and suffering were temporary.

Simeon knew that his yearning and need for great patience was temporary --
- and that God would act and come and reveal Himself.

The Empire ---- the Roman occupation --- the presence of evil --- and manifestation of evil from time to time ----- witness what happened in Paris this past week ---- is not anything with any kind of permanent or lasting presence.

God is doing something different in the world --- regardless of how things sometimes look and even are.

Simeon and Anna gathered in their temple --- at a time when their homeland was occupied by a foreign despotic and brutal empire --- the Roam Empire.

But they knew that this wasn't the be all end all for Israel ---- they also knew that despite the sorrow and suffering of their people God was doing something different.

Just as He still is.

Gold told Simeon that he would see the very beginning of this difference in his lifetime --- and that he Simeon would witness Israel's consolation --- verse 25 from Luke's gospel says today.

I believe that we too can catch glimpses of God's consolation.

And we can do so despite foreign occupation --- despite the fact that we no longer live in a Christian society.

Every day we witness acts that are explicitly in contradiction to the way of Jesus Christ ---- turn on the news and there are always more examples of this than anyone person could ever care to see in one day.

But ---- every day we can also witness acts that are explicitly in accordance and in harmony with the way of Jesus Christ as well.

And sometimes it just takes the kind of discernment and patient --- long view approach ---- that we see in Simeon and Anna today to see this.

God doesn't always show His power and influence quickly --- sometimes it's a far more arduous route to experiencing His beauty --- wonder --- and power.

Indeed very often --- it's only after much patient waiting --- attending --- discerning ---- that we truly experience all that God has in store for us.

One of the great gifts to the Christian community that we as Presbyterians --- Reformed Christians --- bring is that we are the church Reformed and always reforming.

Put another way we are the church discerned and always discerning --- still seeking and waiting on and attending on God's will.

We are a people forever traveling ----- never having quite arrived --- until of course Christ comes again --- and we meet Him face to face.

Until then we carry on --- we journey on ----- we discern on.

We remain open.

Until Christ comes again we find great comfort and guidance and direction from the example that people like Anna and Simeon provide.

Quietly carrying on --- going about their business of attending on God's will ---- day in day out --- never giving up ---- praying --- worshipping ---- attending ----- discerning.

Remaining open to God's lead and God's direction.

To be Christian means to always be in the state of becoming.

Changing --- growing --- becoming more and more in tune with God's will as each day passes ----- and as we attend on His next great act of love.

And so we carry on ----- and so we discern on.

Eyes wide open ---- hearts wide open.

Looking ---- waiting --- open ----- eager ---- attentive.

Full of faith ----- just as Anna and Simeon were.

Never giving up --- or becoming discouraged to the point of defeat

Discernment ----- “Good judgment and insight into God’s will.”

Discernment --- seeing the direction God wants us to take and walking into it trusting Him all the way.

Amen.