

The famous facilitator of slave escape, Harriet Tubman, was known to go to train stations and simply wait for the next train, not knowing anything about the schedule. She couldn't read anyway, and tried to stay out of sight as much as she could. When asked why she would do that, she said that she knew the train was coming. She waited without a schedule because she knew she was in the right place, the place where, if you waited, trains would come.

Something similar is going on in today's reading about Simeon and Anna and their recognition of Jesus in the Temple. Remember, Luke has Mary and Joseph living in Nazareth but traveling to Bethlehem for Jesus to be born, thus establishing his lineage from King David. Now they travel to Jerusalem to dedicate the baby and for Mary to be purified after giving birth. Luke is writing for a largely non-Jewish audience, and they wouldn't necessarily know the fine points of Jewish practice, but they can see that this is a couple who take their religious obligations seriously.

Once they're in the Temple, they have startling encounters with two venerable elders. Simeon is summoned by the Holy Spirit to come to the Temple from whatever he's doing, and takes this unannounced family's newborn in his arms to declare that something long awaited has begun to unfold. Lord, 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 glory to your people Israel." And then he adds, to Mary, that the child "is destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel," which hearkens back to Mary's own song about the hungry being fed and the rich being sent away empty.

Jesus is born, and Luke writes, in a time when many Judeans did fervently look for the promised messiah. Simeon seems to recognize him, and to anticipate the kind of resistance that he will encounter. Anna likewise recognizes something special about the child. She's also a venerable character, by virtue of her age and widowhood somewhat beyond the requirements of a normal member of society. We don't have her words, but Luke tells us that she praised God and spoke about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

So here's what we have, the way Luke tells the story: a poor but noble couple travel to the far city of his ancestry. The lowest and most marginal laborers in society are the first to hear God's messengers proclaiming the couple's child to be the messiah. Because this couple are devout, they take the trouble to travel again to the center of organized religion in order to fulfil religious duty. While in that heart of established religion, the child is again recognized as messiah and future disrupter, and he is so recognized by two people who are also well-established as religiously observant but who are also so elderly as to have outlived or transcended the kinds of qualms about influence and power that would characterize, for instance, the priests. It was remarkable and miraculous that the shepherds were the first to hear the news about the newborn messiah, because shepherds are rough characters. But on further reflection, it's not so remarkable, because God is well-known to defy expectations and focus on younger sons, obscure women, and poor hungry people of no distinction. The question is, will the established center of religion be as receptive as the shepherds were on the margins, where this fulfillment of prophecy began to unfold?

Simeon and Anna, while old and venerable, as I said, are not people with structural

power. They're not priests or Sadducees. They're at the center of the religious establishment, but they are not "of" it. When Simeon prophesies that Jesus is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and warns Mary that a sword will pierce her own soul, he's describing the conflict that will take place when Jesus brings Mary's own earlier challenge to those in power. Will the center respond to Jesus with the same joy as the margins did? Or will they not see him with the Rev. Ozzie Smith calls "certain eyes"?

This story has Mary and Joseph participating in religious ritual because they've just made that commitment. They're not called to the Temple by an angel, or doing something out of character by going there. It's an effort for them, but they are habitual practitioners of their faith, so they just do it. And Anna is always there; she spends her life praying and fasting. Simeon doesn't live there, but he's clearly woven his life around Temple observance too. These people are able to recognize Jesus—his potential and promise and danger—because they are habituated to the life of faith. They have developed "certain eyes," or eyes to see God at work on earth.

You may remember ages ago, in mid-March, right as the pandemic was taking hold, a 24 year-old woman named Breonna Taylor was shot and killed in her apartment in Louisville by police executing a no-knock search warrant. I don't think I heard about it at the time. It was only this past summer, after George Floyd's death, that I began to hear people saying, "Say her name! Breonna Taylor!" and I learned about her death. At the same time, also unnoticed by me, a woman named Cori Bush was running for Congress for the third time in Missouri. If you haven't read about Cori Bush, she's a nurse and a pastor, Black, who joined the protests over Michael Brown's death in 2014 because her son is just a year younger than Brown. She's a

single mother who's been homeless, and as Rep. Ayanna Pressley said, "understands deeply the scale and scope of the hurt that so many are experiencing right now."

Cori Bush won her race this time, and went to Washington in October for freshman orientation. She wore a face mask that said "Breonna Taylor" on it, because of "say her name." Because it's just not plausible that it's a coincidence that so many Black people die from police violence, and remembering and repeating their names is a way to keep our attention on the problem. So then guess what happened. Bunches of our US Representatives called her "Breonna," because they didn't know the story of Breonna Taylor and they thought she was wearing her name on her mask.

"Once I explained who she was, it stopped," she said, but the error stung — because the lawmakers hadn't recognized Taylor's name.

"It hurts," Bush said, "that . . . people who want to be leaders of this country don't know the struggles that are happening to Black people in this country."ⁱ

God moves into the centers of power from the margins of power—from the hills outside Bethlehem to the Temple in Jerusalem—but you have to have "certain eyes" to see that God is acting. You have to be certain that the train is coming to sit and wait for it for hours, and you have to be habituated to the ancient tradition of stories about God and us to be able to recognize when God is starting some good and important trouble. You have to know the story of Breonna Taylor and all her tragic Black kin, to know why it would be important to bring her name to the center of power of the United States—and if you don't know her story, you fail to recognize why the people of Missouri have sent you your new colleague. That actual Members of Congress, steeped in politics, truly did not know about Breonna Taylor, tells you everything about where their attention *has* been.

Jewish tradition has high regard for studying. Maybe in the post-Temple world that's just the next best thing to hanging around the Temple, but it's definitely the way you steep yourself in the ancient stories. However, tradition also says that a Jew should not study in a room without windows. That's because you have to steep yourself in the ancient stories *and* take in new information that comes from the outside. That's how you *really* study.

Simeon and Anna were stationed in the very place, the temple, where certain eyes were able to see and recognize the boy Jesus for who he was and is--the Messiah! For others, experience, maybe ambition, had clouded their expectation, but this text calls us to expect to experience and to express what God has shown us from outside our walls. The world would not recognize him as the Messiah. What a sight to see consolation and redemption in a baby that was yet gurgling.ⁱⁱ

Let us pray. Thank you, God, for giving us your All, the Word made flesh in your Son Jesus. Lord, grant that we might have certain eyes in the midst of our present uncertainty. We thank you. We praise you for the gift of Jesus. Amen.

ⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/cori-bush-blm-congress-demofrats-squad/2020/12/21/556ac9f4-3cad-11eb-9276-ae0ca72729be_story.html

ⁱⁱ https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf20026ad/sight_for_certain_eyes