

God help us to hear your word and respond with our whole selves, as Simeon and Anna responded to the baby Jesus. In his name, Amen.

Laughing.

Crying.

A racing heartbeat.

A case of the hiccups.

Collapsing on the floor.

Jumping for joy.

Strong emotions can elicit intense physical reactions!

When we experience something that touches our soul, we can be moved to yell, weep, write a letter, donate money, spend a week in bed, or change our lifestyles to address whatever thing we now realize is so important, even if we never noticed it before.

Our bodies can respond with energy or apathy, and in ways that we sometimes don't know how to control.

Can you relate to that strong emotional response?

Think of something that you are *passionate* about, that elicits a physical response in you. Hold on to that emotion.

And now, imagine with me.

You can close your eyes, if it helps. (Try not to fall asleep.)

We are going to imagine ourselves in the shoes of some of the most faithful people in history – people who were physically, spiritually, and emotionally changed by their interaction with the divine.

We start by heading back in time.

Imagine that you are living in Jerusalem, just over 2000 years ago.

You are Jewish. You have studied and internalized the Scriptures for your entire life.

You know that God promises to send a Messiah, a chosen one, who will forever change the world for the better.

You have decided to make the anticipation of God's promised Messiah your life's work.

You have foregone a traditional career or family life in favor of spending all your time at the Temple, praying and awaiting God's promise, as foretold by the prophets.

Perhaps, after realizing you weren't going to leave, the folks in charge there decided to give you a job as caretaker or something. In any case, you are well cared for – you have food and shelter, even though you don't fit in to the typical societal norms.

You talk about the coming of the Messiah to anyone who will listen. You love to interpret the Scriptures with other people, and you can't help but share the good news of God's promise with them.

Clearly, mainline Protestant denominations in Christianity have not yet been invented, since you're so eager to share God's message with others!

Every day, you watch for the promise of God to walk through the Temple gates. Will he be old or young? Rich or poor? Jewish or a foreigner?

The question of male or female barely crosses your mind, because everyone with any power in the world is male... but maybe, just maybe, God could work outside that gender barrier.

Without knowing exactly what you're expecting, you keep a keen eye on everyone and everything. You can't wait for God's Messiah to arrive.

And yet, every day you reach bedtime without seeing the Messiah.

Still, you have clearly felt that God will not let you leave this earthly life without seeing the promise fulfilled. So you go to sleep in hope, and rise early to be sure that the next day you will also meet each person who enters the Temple gates, in hopes that one of them may be the chosen one of God.

Today, finally, after years of waiting, you see a young woman come through the gate of the Temple with her first-born child.

This woman is poor. She brings the lowest-cost offering that was still presentable, according to the law – a pair of pigeons. City rats with wings. Nothing like the sheep or goats that are brought in by more well-off families.

But she's faithful – she and her husband are following the requirements of the law, bringing their son to the Temple for a dedication. Every time a family dedicated their first-born child to God, they were remembering how God rescued them from slavery in Egypt. (Exodus 13:11-14)

She was able to make the stop on her way back to her hometown of Nazareth, from Bethlehem, where the baby was born.

If God hadn't called her to Bethlehem, she would have had a hard time making the 70-mile journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem just for the dedication – a journey of 3 or 4 days each way.

But thanks to divine interference or the meddling of the government – take your pick – this young family was just 7 miles away from the Temple when the baby reached 40 days of age.

So the parents were able to make the trip. This new mother brought her baby boy to Jerusalem. And she presented him in the Temple, as required by the law.

Of course, you don't know all this right away. All you know, at first glance, is that this family seems different, somehow. After so many years of waiting in the Temple, this family stands out to you.

Is it the mother? She seems overwhelmed and awestruck, as most new mothers are. But her sense of awe goes deeper than others.

Is it the father? He seems to still be getting used to the whole idea of fatherhood, which also isn't unusual. But his confusion seems more complicated than your average first-time father.

Or is it – could it possibly be – the baby?

That tiny form, wrapped up in blankets, is he the one that you have been awaiting for so long?

You'll have to get a little closer. See his face.

See if the light of God is shining out at you from his deep brown eyes.

The parents get closer. The baby gets closer.

Your heart rate increases. Your muscles tighten, like a cat ready to pounce.

You know that the moment has finally arrived.

When your eyes meet those of the infant, you can see the promise of God fulfilled there.

And you can't help but sing!

Finally, God has shown you the face of the Messiah! And your face reflects the glory of God that you are now watching, in the flesh.

The promise of God has come true, for you personally, and for your whole community.

Through this baby, the power of God will upend the world's social and political order. Justice will become the reality for everyone. The powerful will be humbled, and the lowly will be exalted. Praise God!

This baby tells you all these things, even though he cannot speak yet. And as you look up into the face of the mother, you see that she also knows these things. God has spoken to her, just as God has spoken to you, and she is in awe at all of the things that this baby of hers will do someday.

And so your next words are to the mother.

Yes, young woman, you know that your baby is the promised one of God.

And that makes your job harder. Because of the great change that this baby will bring to the world, he will be persecuted and tormented. And because you love him, the same will happen to you.

Parenting isn't an easy job in any circumstance. But when your child has been given a holy mission, before he is even born, your work as a parent will be even harder than usual.

You tell the mother, may God guide you each step along the way.

And then it's done.

The baby turns and gazes contently into the face of his mother, and she and the father continue onward to offer their sacrifice.

And you are left to wonder.

What is the proper response to encountering God in the flesh?

As Simeon or Anna, your entire life had been spent in anticipation, and the proper response was a song of praise!

But come back to yourself now. As a child or parent, a professional or a student, a sibling or grandparent, a retiree or a friend – as a worshipper of God in the 21st century, what is your response to encountering God in the flesh?

Does your heart leap within you? Do your legs give out?

Are you moved to weep or to laugh?

At Christmas time, we choose which ways we will respond to the presence of God among us.

We eat our favorite foods, or sometimes our least favorite (but it's tradition!).

We buy things for others. We find ways to serve the community.

We send cards, we take photos, we give to charity.

And we sing.

Along with Anna and Simeon, we give praise to God for the birth of the child!

Like those two prophets, we can hardly help it. A few lines of Joy to the World start playing, and we immediately begin to hum along.

It's like that guy in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* – Prince Herbert – his father has great plans for him to marry and rule the kingdom, but he would rather just sing!

And so the music swells and he is about to burst into song, when his father interrupts and forbids his singing.

But we have no cranky old father breaking in to tell us, no more singing!

We are free to offer our praises in whatever tempo or key, in whatever words or melody, at whatever time and place and in whatever physical posture we feel compelled to adopt.

Just sing!

God welcomes our praise.

And the more that we praise, the more we will recognize God among us.

The incarnation did not stop on Christmas.

God has been present in our world since the first moment of creation. Jesus just gave us a new way of seeing God with us.

God *is* with us. This is good news.

From the Temple in Jerusalem 2000 years ago, to our worship space this morning – from today's below-zero temperatures in the upper Midwest, to today's sweltering heat in Botswana or Ghana – from the deepest cloudy night when there is no moon to be found, to a bright sunny day with blinding light reflected off snow or water – God is with us.

Like Simeon and Anna, we have seen God in the flesh. We continue to see God incarnate every time we look in the face of our neighbor.

Do we laugh or cry, or burst into song?

Are we open or defensive, cautious or thoughtful?

Our reaction to God with us guides our relationship with every person we encounter.

How do you respond?

Take the example of Anna and Simeon as a guide.

And keep your eyes and your heart wide open to recognize the presence of God in our midst.

Amen.