

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
December 31, 2017

Today's meditation reflects upon scripture but then moves to questions which worship participants discuss while sitting around in card tables.

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." 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 the glory of your people Israel." The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Faithful Souls

When I picked a sermon title for today, I was thinking primarily of Simeon and Anna, the two faithful people who waited decades and decades for the coming of the Messiah and who expressed such joy upon laying their eyes upon the baby Jesus that day in the temple. I hadn't thought so much about Mary and Joseph. But they are the ones with whom our story today begins.

Mary and Joseph come to bring Jesus to the temple for his dedication. Think baptism in our church, where parents present their child for the water upon the forehead and the blessing and pledge of support from the community of faith. In Mary and

Joseph's day, the Mosaic law required parents to come and offer a sacrifice. The dedication of Jesus in the temple is depicted on the cover of our bulletin today, and if you look closely you will see that Joseph is holding two turtledoves, while Simeon reaches out to hold the infant Jesus in his arms.

So we can say this: Mary and Joseph, who have traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem, to Bethlehem and back to Jerusalem (where the temple was) well, they would have been tired. In the forty days since Jesus was born, they have been on the move quite a bit. They are first time parents, with lots of unanswered questions. They are not a well to do couple, or else Joseph's offering would have been more grand – something like a goat or a lamb – but for a person, or family of meager circumstances a pair of turtledoves would be an acceptable offering. They are keeping the faith, doing what they are suppose to do – though they are of little means, they are living out their faith commitments, doing the best they can.

Adding Mary and Joseph to the list of faithful souls shows that faithfulness is not necessarily tied to age and accumulated wisdom, and certainly not tied to economic means.

In the temple Mary and Joseph encounter these two older people, Simeon and Anna. It is a beautiful encounter, though not without a dose of reality, a touch of sorrow, or the mentioning of that coming on down the pike. Maybe this encounter, between young parents and older folks reminds us in a church that so values being an intergenerational community – as ours does – how important it is that we see each other, recognize each other, and support each other on our journeys – for there are many chapters in a life, and many times when our capacity for faith can be tested – perhaps particularly when we parent and worry over the wellbeing of a child.

Simeon is the first to greet the couple. He has waited all his life for this child, and now, he says, he can die in peace. It is strange in joy to speak of death, but Simeon knows he is moving into those later days. How poignant this is – to us, maybe especially, in a culture that wants to look away from death – that Simeon says what he says. Here is a baby, the promised one, hope for the world but that does not take away from the reality that generations rise and fall, that death will come to Simeon as it comes to us all. Because of this child, however, Simeon says he can die calmly, confidently. He can be as hospitable to his impending death as he has been to the child Mary brought to the temple, embracing it, blessing God for it.

Then there is Anna. What do we know of Anna? Luke doesn't put specific words in her mouth...too bad, that. He does tell us that she is a person who has known loss ("having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of 84"). He does tell us that she is focused on faith, and on waiting: "She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer". If Simeon is Tevya, all expressive emotion, Anna is quiet fortitude, persistence and focused expectancy, one whose very being points to trust in the goodness of God.

And she made it her job, after encountering the child, to tell everyone: “She began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel”

Mary and Joseph and Simeon and Anna bring us to the themes of Christmas: joy in Jesus coming to live among us, (God in flesh appearing the carols say) and they bring us too to the new year the importance of being able to know what time it is, the importance of being able to discern, to really see, what God is doing in the world. If Luke’s Christmas telling celebrates the baby, this part of his story leans into the future into who Jesus will be, this grown up Jesus who will teach and preach and live and die for us and for all people, this grown up Jesus who will not always be appreciated in the world, this grown up Jesus who will meet with rejection.

It’s a good text to help us think about wisdom, and what wisdom might be for our day. It’s a good text to think about 2017 moving into 2018.

So we have two questions to reflect upon, in this time when you, the congregation gathered here today, help “write the sermon”. Talk some amongst yourselves at your table, some tables may want to merge to form one...and be about answering the two questions you find in your bulletin.

First, Where in the last year did you find wisdom? Or, if this is more helpful: how has life of late been offering you spiritual teaching?

And then, in about five minutes, I’ll signal it’s time to move to the second question having to do with hopes for the new year.

We closed with some sharing about our responses, and with an affirmation based on Ecclesiastes 3, “to everything there is a season...”