



“After Christmas”

Text: Luke 2:22-40

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

December 31, 2023

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Our passage from Luke picks up after the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph leave Bethlehem and head back to Jerusalem to present their baby to God at the temple. This required making a sacrifice, a gift to God, if you will, out of their thankfulness for the health and wellbeing of their child.

What we are reminded of right from the start is that Mary and Joseph were poor. They could only afford a sacrifice of two turtle doves and not a lamb that the rich would have offered. At the temple, they encounter Simeon and Anna; both are elderly and neither of them are people of importance in the society in which they resided, but they were both people of great faith.

We are told that Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he saw the Messiah. Anna had been at the temple 24/7 praying and fasting and waiting for the salvation of the world to come. Why would God allow these two, after the shepherds, to be the ones who recognized who Jesus was, be the next people to recognize who Jesus is? Again we are reminded that Jesus came first to the lowly and that when we have faith, God will give us eyes to see. Simeon and Anna must have both seen many young couples come into the temple over the years, bringing their baby boys to be blessed and purified. Yet both knew when they came into the presence of this particular baby that he was the one; he was the Messiah.

So what do we learn from this story?

First, we should note that Joseph and Mary gave a sacrificial offering to God when they brought their baby to the temple to be blessed. While I would never be a proponent of animal sacrifice, I like the idea of a gift made to God when a child is baptized in our modern day context. In the Presbyterian Church of Cameroon, it is customary for people to do a thanksgiving offering when they feel especially blessed by any meaningful situation. When I was there a man made a thanksgiving offering for the survival of one twin and his wife. It had been a traumatic birth and in the process one

twin died and the mother almost died, but she managed to survive. The response to this was the family made a thanksgiving offering. The extended family sang and danced their way down the aisle as they presented their gifts to God.

In the U.S. it is more common for the family to throw a party after a baptism and for gifts to be given to the baby with little thought to giving gifts to God; and I confess that was not in my thinking when my children were baptized.

I had a situation in my second interim where a couple wanted to have their baby baptized at the church. They had spoken to an Elder about the baptism before I had started. When I spoke with the parents, I found out that they had never even stepped foot into the church and that they had the reception hall booked for the baptism party already. It was in actuality just a ritual that held no true meaning for the parents, but seemed to feel that it was some rite of passage that they should undertake for their baby; unlike the importance this purification blessing was to Mary and Joseph. Their faith informed their actions.

Also, we know that Jesus didn't need to be purified as an infant and we could also say that he didn't need to be baptized as an adult, because he was of course without sin. But as theologian Karl Barth writes: "No one came to the Jordan was as laden and afflicted as He." He needed to be baptized, to be washed clean of sin; not his own sin, but for our sin.

Second, we are reminded through Simeon and Anna that, like the Shepherds, Jesus is recognized by the people of no significance by society's standards; by people who have no power. It was they and not the High Priests that recognized Jesus for who he was.

Also, for Simeon, we find someone who is so in tune with the Holy Spirit that he feels the nudging of the Holy Spirit to go to the temple on that day and at that time. He had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah.

It is not always easy to distinguish our desires from the will of God. We may want something so much that we think the Spirit is nudging us to do the thing that we want, and God does at times honor the requests we make to God, but there are also times when God instructs us to go or do, but we have difficulty hearing God because we aren't spending enough time in conversation with God, which includes listening. Simeon's faith life obviously allowed him to be able to hear the Word of God to him and he responded in faith and trust. The result being that not only did he get to hold the Messiah, but he was then able to die in peace and hope.

Having worked as a hospice chaplain for many years, it has always been interesting to see those who go through the dying process with faith and those who go through it with fear. That is not to say that those who exhibit great faith don't have moments of fear. After all, they are human and the unknown carries its own set of anxieties, but their faith is greater and is able to overcome any fears that they may have. Simeon had faith and was blessed with seeing the Messiah and so was able to die peacefully and with confidence after having seen the Messiah.

Anna was also a person of faith who was at the temple praying and fasting, waiting for the Messiah, waiting to see the One who would bring salvation to the people. Her focus was more outward looking and she, too, was blessed. She saw the One who had come to redeem the world.

Third, we see that Mary and Joseph's life did not drastically change after the birth of Jesus. They were still poor. They still struggled. And even after being told by angels that their son would be born of God, after hearing the words of the shepherds glorifying this baby, they were still amazed at the words of Simeon and Anna.

I would guess that most, if not all of you, have had those moments when your eyes were opened and you encountered God with such clarity, with such intimacy, that you knew without a shadow of a doubt that God was real and cared for you so deeply - a mountaintop experience, if you will. Those moments, however powerful, may stay with us in memory, but the emotional feelings that came with it fade. It is then that some may question if that experience was real or not. Was that what it was like for Mary and Joseph that caused them to be amazed at the words of Simeon or was it that they were amazed that again their baby was recognized as the Messiah when still just a newborn? They were average folk who had been blessed extraordinarily. We are also average people and while we may not be blessed with being the parents of the Messiah, if we look we will see the extraordinary blessings that come to us continually throughout our lives.

And while we aren't told much about Joseph, we do know that Mary was always there for Jesus. She was his mother, but she was also his disciple. She was a woman who believed, grew in faith, sacrificed much for the God she worshipped. She lived a life that she could never have imagined before that day the angel came to her. She lived a life in the presence of the Savior. And she also lived the life prophesied by Simeon, a life that would be pierced by a sword. But her faith let her know that her pain was nothing compared to the sacrifices Jesus would make for the salvation of humankind. Her sacrifices were always done with the confidence that salvation would bring healing to a broken world.

So what do we learn from this After Christmas event? Do we seek to hear the word of God that comes to us through the Holy Spirit? Do we have enough faith to believe what God is telling us, even if it is extraordinary, like what was told to Mary? Do we believe that the Holy Spirit can nudge us, speak to us with such clarity, like Simeon and Anna were spoken to, and do we believe and act on those nudgings?

Do we find ourselves at peace in a stressful and often cruel world because we have seen this newborn King or do we still listen and believe the news, the words of humans, instead of the words of God through scripture and prayer? Do we feel ourselves blessed when we are in the presence of our Savior? Do we see the blessings that came to us through this past year as hard as it may have been, as grief stricken or as confusing or challenging as it may have been?

Finally, Simeon and Anna never gave up. Simeon was promised to see the Messiah before he died. We don't know how long before this event he was told that, but it seems from the story that it was a long time before, but he never gave up believing what God had told him. It was the same for Anna. She had spent her life in that temple praying and fasting. She held out hope. She believed. Do we give up on God too easily when our prayers aren't answered as fast as we would like? Can we still believe and hope even when the same prayer is uttered year after year? These two show us faith. They show us persistence. They teach us about hope and faith.

Last week we welcomed this baby, this very heart of God, into our lives; this wonder of pure joy, pure light, pure love. Jesus came to bring us peace and confidence like Simeon received. Do we receive that peace and confidence even though we face the daily struggles of our lives?

For we, like all the disciples before us, continue to face hardships, deal with sin in our lives and be affected because of the sin of others. We face death - death of loved ones and our own eventual death, but Christ took upon himself our sins. He brought us hope and he gave us eternal life. That is what came after Christmas. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

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