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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, February 2, 2020

Presentation of Our Lord/4th Sunday after Epiphany/Lectionary 4/Proper X/Year A

First Reading: Micah 6:1-8

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:22-40

Sermon Title: “The Blessed Ones of God”

Theme

This story is a study in contrasts: the infant Jesus with the aged prophets; the joy of birth with the ominous words of Simeon to Mary; the faithful fulfilling of the law with the presentation of the one who will release its hold over us. Through it all, we see the light of God’s salvation revealed to the world.

Text

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, [Mary and Joseph] brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Sermon

There are a couple of things going on in this Gospel Reading that require some explanation.

These verses record the observance of two points of Jewish Law: the redemption of the first-born, and the purification of the mother after childbirth.

The ritual of redeeming the first-born male son reminds the Jewish people of their redemption from slavery in Egypt and of avoiding the last of the ten plagues to afflict the Egyptians, the slaughter of the first-born sons. This was accomplished by slaughtering a lamb in accordance with God's command and placing its blood on the doorposts; upon seeing it, the angel of death passed over the Israelite families.

Each family therefore dedicated its firstborn son to God's service, but then redeemed the boy for payment of five sanctuary shekels. As a consequence, in his place, God accepted the Levites, the descendants of Jacob's son, Levi, for service in the Temple. The redemption of the first born was to take place after the son was thirty days old.

The mother of a son remained ritually unclean for forty days after childbirth. On the forty-first day a sacrifice was to be offered. As it is written in Leviticus,

Leviticus 12:6-8 When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. ⁷He shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female. ⁸If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.

From the Gospel Reading from Luke we learn that Joseph and Mary must have been relatively poor because they chose the more affordable option of birds.

Now, when Joseph and Mary arrived at the Temple to obediently have these rituals performed, they were met by two other devout Jewish folks.

A man named Simeon who, according to Luke, was given a revelation by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before seeing the LORD's Messiah. Why Simeon? I do not know, but perhaps it was because as Luke noted,

^{25b}this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.

So what can be said about Simeon is that because of his godliness, and obvious closeness to the LORD, and no doubt, because of his persistence in prayer over the comforting of his people Israel, the LORD revealed just a little about what and when the LORD was going to do, and further promised him that he would see the LORD's Messiah.

Joseph and Mary arrived at the Temple to do for him what was customary under the law and they were confronted by Simeon who spontaneously took the baby Jesus in his arms and began praising God. Those words have been put to song that is sometimes sung at the conclusion of our more formal Sunday liturgies. A song we call by its Latin name, the Nunc Dimittis.

If an old man grabbed a mother's child in church today, we would be disturbed, but Luke recorded,

³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Knowing how the story ends, we can interpret Simeon's prophecy, but we are left to wonder what Joseph and Mary thought.

Well, the weirdness of that day was just starting. Luke told us that there were two devout Jewish folks at the Temple at that moment. Simeon was one. An aged prophetess by the name of Anna was the other.

Now Anna had been a widow for a very long time, and the plight of widows in those days was that they were to become the dependents of the Jewish community. In Anna's case, since she lived in Jerusalem, that meant she was dependent on the Temple, where she was expected to not remarry, fast regularly, do good works, and

pray night and day for the deliverance of Israel. Luke indicated that she was diligent in these details and "^{37b}never left the Temple."

In a similar spontaneous way, when Anna saw Joseph and Mary and their baby Jesus in the Temple, she too spontaneously "³⁸began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

Again, let me remind you that these two rituals, the redemption of the first-born was to take place after the son is thirty days old, and the purification of the mother after childbirth was to take place forty days after childbirth, so likely Jesus is only forty days old at this point. With that in mind, let me remind you that

- The Annunciation of Mary, when the angel Gabriel told her she was bear God's son was less than a year ago.
- The visit of the same angel Gabriel to Joseph to tell him of God's plan happened after that.
- The Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth that caused Elizabeth's baby, John to jump in her womb happened after that.
- The visit of the shepherds to the stable in Bethlehem reporting all that the angels had told them, would have only happened forty days before.

I remind you of all that to invite you to wonder what Joseph and Mary must have thought about all this fuss being made over their baby, Jesus.

And while your mind wanders off thinking about that, imagine what was going through the minds of Simeon and Anna. All that God had promised had finally come to pass, and they were among the first to notice.

But I also wonder if they knew how it would all go down. Simeon seemed to have an idea. And Anna certainly knew that redemption didn't happen without a sacrifice.

This story is a study in contrasts: the infant Jesus with the aged prophets; the joy of birth with the ominous words of Simeon to Mary; the faithful fulfilling of the law with the presentation of the one who will release its hold over us. Let me remind

you that we are in the season of Epiphany, and so through all that happened on that one day in the Temple, we see the light of God's salvation revealed to the world.

All Israel, represented in this story by Simeon and Anna, had been anticipating and praying for the arrival of God's Messiah, and upon seeing Jesus being presented at the Temple, they knew that their prayers had been answered. Their joy was so overwhelming that they both spontaneously broke into song. Their songs contained both joy for the redemption of humankind and a sad prophecy about what this baby's future will be.

At the end of the story of Jesus' earthly life, Simeon and Anna are no doubt dead and gone, but blessed never the less to know that God was about to change everything through this little baby, God's Messiah.

Joseph disappeared by the time Jesus was an adult. Scripture does not tell us what happened to him. But we do find Mary, Jesus' mother, at the foot of the cross, with just a few of his disciples, and I suspect that she must have experienced a mixture of horrible grief and confusion – confusion over what she remembered had been told her about her son, and his then, present reality. We are comforted in knowing that her horrible grief was short-lived. But along the journey to the cross, did she remember this day, the day that two old prophets prophesied about her baby boy?

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

More importantly, more personally, this story forces us to think about our response to the Gospel story, and that is that God came down to live among us in the form of the human baby, Jesus of Nazareth. About this one, the angels sang, and so did Simeon and Anna.

Luke added that he grew up to be ⁴⁰**strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God.** As the adult Jesus, he would give himself as an example of the godly life; preach and teach the truth about the love, grace, and mercy of his Father, and demonstrate God's power through his performance of signs and miracles.

But it was on the cross, where all that had been prophesied about him came true, where he most poignantly demonstrated his obedience to his Father's will and his love for all creation.

I think it could be argued that it is our season of Easter when our most joyful songs are sung, because that is when we celebrate the completion of his work, the redemption of all creation. And we, among all creation are his beneficiaries. And for that reason, we join our voices with Simeon and Anna and all the saints who precede us and who will follow us.

(Saturday) So we can leave here and live out our days, singing sincerely our Song of the Day, "Be Not Afraid," because we are the blessed ones of God who know the end of the story. Let us continue singing, "Be Not Afraid."

(Sunday) So we can leave here and live out our days unafraid of what we may encounter, because we are the blessed ones of God who know the end of the story, which is our story.

This is my story, this is my song,
praising my savior all the day long

Let us continue singing "Blessed Assurance."