

January 15, 2023  
Rev. Lisa Schrott  
Luke 2:22-38  
Recognition

We have just celebrated the birth of our savior, Immanuel - God with us, with the shepherds and angels and magi as they recognized the birth of the Messiah. This morning we hear the story of two ordinary, but extraordinary individuals, Simeon and Anna, who too meet the infant Jesus and recognize that he is the Messiah. Hear now these words from Luke chapter 2, beginning at verse 22.

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

Now 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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, 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 the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then 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 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There 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, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At 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.

**This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

In our scripture this morning, life is beginning to return to normal for Mary and Joseph and we get a snapshot of the pattern of life for devout Jewish families. They are enacting the rites and traditions of the Hebrew people. And yet even in this moment, we hear of an encounter, unexpected for the new parents, that shapes our understanding of the life to which Jesus was

called. It is a story of recognition – of immediate recognition – of recognition so profound that it was life changing.

Mary and Joseph present their child Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem, and as is the custom, offering a sacrifice. At the temple their paths cross with Simeon. This was not a random event. No, the scripture is very clear, stating three times that the Holy Spirit was guiding Simeon. Guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon went into the temple; and when Mary and Joseph brought the child Jesus into the temple to dedicate him, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, 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 glory to the people of Israel.”

This is a powerful testimony – one of the first testimonies we hear attesting to who Jesus is. It is also a poignant testimony because the Holy Spirit had told Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah. Simeon not only recognizes that this baby in his mother’s arms is the Messiah, but he also recognizes that he will soon die. As profound as that recognition is – he Simeon has met the Messiah - Simeon provides for us a succinct and authoritative definition of the Messiah: a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.

Then there is Anna, a widow who lived in the temple, a custom that allowed women to serve through prayer and fasting and also be cared for by the community. Anna encountered Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus. And like Simeon, she recognized Jesus as the one who would redeem Jerusalem.

Think about the power of these testimonies, especially in light of the promises and declarations we heard in days before Jesus’ birth. The angel said to Mary: “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” The angels tell Joseph that Mary will bear a son and he is to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. The angels say to the shepherds that in the town of David a Savior has been born; he is the Messiah, the Lord. Simeon and Anna add their testimonies to that of the angels. Simeon and Anna, two people you would likely pass by without taking note, or if you took note, it would likely not be because they are about to speak prophetic words.

As Pastor Julie Peebles comments, “In this lovely moment, Simeon and Anna carry with them the longing of their people. Mary and Joseph carry not only their son but the hope for Israel's future. Past, present, and future meet in one intimate, brief moment in the Temple.... Anna and Simeon show us how to live expectantly. Beyond just hoping that God would someday redeem Israel, they took it as a given that God would fulfill God’s promises. This was not wishful

thinking, but profound trust, deepened over time into lifelong habit. They expected God to act, and they were not disappointed.”<sup>1</sup>

Simeon’s recognition of the Messiah is profound because he recognizes that the Messiah is the glory to the people Israel **AND** he recognizes that the Messiah is a light for revelation to the Gentiles. The scripture tell us the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Were they amazed that Simeon recognized their son as the long-awaited Messiah to the people of Israel? Were they amazed that Simeon recognized their son as a light for revelation to the Gentiles, something they had not yet recognized themselves?

What I appreciate so much about this scripture is this “both/and” nature. Too often in our history as a church, we have focused on an “either/or” narrative – a narrative of the Jewish Jesus who is a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophesies vs. the Gentile communities who accepted Jesus as their Messiah and savior. So many of Paul’s letters, as well as the Book of Acts, focus on this tension. Yet one of our first testimonies about who Jesus is makes the ‘both/and’ proclamation right up front. And yet the earliest followers of Jesus too often fell back on the binary thinking.

Tomorrow we celebrate the birth of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., another leader for whom this binary pattern of recognition was often applied. Were King’s words spoken to inspire, motivate and reassure his fellow Black citizens of their worth and dignity, their rightful place in our society and the possibilities and dreams to which they should strive? Or were King’s words spoken to the White community to inspire, motivate and admonish us to work to ensure all people, regardless of the color of their skin had worth and dignity as children of God, a rightful place in our society and the same possibilities and dreams as anyone else? Does it have to be an “either/or”? Why do we too often resist the “both/and”?

Throughout scriptures, prophets often played this “both/and” role as they proclaimed messages from God directed to both the people and to the leaders. And too often both the people and leaders passed the buck to the other party- this message from God doesn’t apply – it is for those other people. Prophets proclaim, and proclaim some more, and those who have ears don’t seem to hear very well.

Dr. Barbara Holmes, a scholar of African American spirituality and mysticism, describes our natural resistance to prophets in our midst: “Prophets are difficult to have around. No one wants to claim the title or do the work because of it. In this postmodern age, everybody is uncomfortable with prophets. They yell when you don’t want them to. They ask for trouble when you could avoid it. They don’t have a politically correct bone in their bodies....

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<sup>1</sup> Julie Peeples. Luke 2:22-40. Commentary 2. Connecting the Reading with the Word. *Connections. B Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship*. Westminster John Knox Press. 2020, p132.

Prophets are leaders, but not leaders of their own choosing. Inevitably, they have some sort of divine encounter. ...In bringing messages from God—and God doesn't mince words—God speaks directly through them. They have a relationship and intimacy with the Divine. ... They have gifts, and they offer signs and wonders associated with the verification of the presence of God. They have communal connections. They act on behalf of community, not for their own gain, and are dependent on the community for help when they need it.”<sup>2</sup>

When I hear Dr. Holmes words it hard not to recognize the prophetic voice of Dr. King. The stereotypical view of a prophet is one who is on the fringe, out in the wilderness preaching into the nothingness, or conversely standing on a city street corner as people look the other way, preaching into the cacophony of noise that is urban life. Yet as Dr. Holmes shares, prophets “have communal connections. They act on behalf of community, not for their own gain.”

On behalf of community...Consider the words Dr. King spoke in his final Sunday sermon preached at the Washington National Cathedral on March 31, 1968. These words are our words of preparation in the bulletin. “Through our scientific and technological genius, we have made of this world a neighborhood and yet we have not had the ethical commitment to make of it a brotherhood. But somehow, and in some way, we have got to do this. We must all learn to live together as brothers or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. And you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way God's universe is made; this is the way it is structured.”<sup>3</sup>

Friends, as Rev. Peoples reflected about Simeon and Anna, so does Dr. King believe that this is not wishful thinking, but profound trust in a God who structured a universe such that we are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. Simeon recognized and rejected the “either/or” – if Jesus came for you then he must not have come for me; if you succeed, then I will not. Simeon recognized it is not a zero sum game. God has called us into an inescapable network of mutuality. And this mutuality begins with recognition, recognition that the one we worship calls us to more than just welcome, calls us to reconciliation.

Reconciliation is the mission of the church. Following the sermon, I will invite us to join together in reciting a portion of the Confession of 1967 from the PC(USA) Book of Confessions. This confession addresses the church's role in the modern world. “It calls the church to obedient action, particularly in response to social problems such as racial

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Holmes. Prophets Belong in Community. *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation from the Center for Action and Contemplation*. Published online at <https://email.cac.org/t-d-e-zjujky-tujklukij-f/>

<sup>3</sup> The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, from his final Sunday sermon titled: “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution” preached at Washington National Cathedral on March 31, 1968. transcript available at <https://singjupost.com/transcript-the-last-sunday-sermon-of-mlk-march-31-1968/?singlepage=1>

discrimination, nationalistic arrogance, and family and class conflict. It sees the life, death, resurrection, and promised coming of Jesus Christ as the pattern for the church's mission today and calls on all Christians to be reconciled to God and to one another."<sup>4</sup>

This summer the 225th PCUSA General Assembly adopted a resolution titled *On Offering an Apology to African Americans for the Sin of Slavery and Its Legacy*.<sup>5</sup> This resolution, in part says, "We, as a people of faith, recognize that the only appropriate path to healing and reconciliation is to acknowledge the wrongs that we, the Presbyterian Church, as part of the institutional church structure, were and are complicit in perpetuating. This was done through interpretation of selected scriptures and rationalization to justify human bondage and perpetuate white supremacy and privilege. We apologize for this transgression."

Likewise our Presbytery, the Presbytery of Lake Michigan, adopted this resolution. At the September 17, 2022 meeting White pastors and ruling elders read the apology to Black members of the Presbytery and guests from the community. It was a powerful and incredibly humbling moment to stand and acknowledge the ways. I as an individual, and we as a collective church, have benefitted from the sin of slavery and its aftermath.

In two weeks, on Saturday January 28, I, along with other local Presbyterian clergy and congregation members will have an opportunity to take a step toward reconciliation with the Black community here in the greater Lansing area. We will participate in a public apology at the Reachout Christian Center Church in Lansing. This event is being organized by First Presbyterian Church, Lansing and the Justice League of Greater Lansing using material from our denomination. If you are interested in participating in the event or would like to know more about the PC(USA) apology, please let me know. Also please know that the apology is just one step in a process of reconciliation, a process that asks more than just words, a process that asks up to step up and act. A process that moves us from recognition to transformation.

Simeon and Anna recognized that the child before them was the Messiah. They recognized that the world was about to be transformed. Simeon took Jesus in his arms, praised God, and declared that Jesus is the Messiah, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Let us live as a people of this light, called to usher in the beloved community, called to recognize that we are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, for this is the way God's universe is made. May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Introduction to the Confession of 1967. *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part 1. Book of Confessions*. Office of the General Assembly, 2014, p286

<sup>5</sup> This document can be found at <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/3000895>