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Luke 2:22-40

How Does a weary world rejoice? We root ourselves in ritual

Our Scripture this morning comes after Luke's telling of the story of Jesus' birth. Luke has told us along the way about the witnesses to Jesus' conception and birth: Mary and Joseph, old Zechariah and Elizabeth, the angels and the shepherds. Our passage today tells us about two more: Simeon and Anna. Listen now to the word of the Lord from Luke 2:21-38.

²¹After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him 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}a 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.

This is the Word of God for the People of God.

Thanks be to God.

Luke gives us a glimpse of Jesus as a child. This gospel is the only one that tells us the baby was circumcised and named Jesus. It is the only one to give this account of Jesus' dedication in the temple, and the only one that tells the story about 12 year old Jesus in the Temple.

Can you imagine the conversations between Mary and Joseph leading up to Jesus' birth? Did they wonder what the baby would look like? What evidence there might be to his being the son of God? What happens when he is born? What does it mean to have a child who is fully human and fully divine? What is their role as parents in raising Jesus?

I wonder how that conversation may have changed after Jesus was born in a manger of all places, and visited by shepherds - likely not the birth story they expected. I wonder what they were thinking and feeling as they made the five-mile journey north to the temple in Jerusalem, the tiny child wrapped in their arms. Surely they were weary.

Those who are parents, or who have observed others parent, know that children don't come with an instruction manual. It is a joyful and painful process of learning as you go, with observation, experience, and hopefully a system of support along the way. But raising God's son? How does that happen? Where to begin?

For Mary and Joseph, they do what they know to do, what they have been taught to do as followers of God. Their faith has guided them this far and so they follow the practices of the Jewish faith that God has called them to live into – rituals of circumcision and naming, cleansing after childbirth, offering the sacrifice (in their case offering two birds is an indication of their poverty), and presentation of the child. In the midst of the chaos and confusion of the days leading up to and surrounding Jesus' birth, I imagine participating in the rituals offers them a sense of grounding. It reminds them, and demonstrates for the newborn, who they are and who they belong to.

I can't help but think of our sacrament of infant baptism – the ritual we participate in as a sign of God's covenant with us and welcoming us into a community of faith, even before we know it. In my home church in North Carolina, following the act of baptism, the pastor would walk the newly baptized baby down the aisle and hand them to a church member to be taken back to the parents. I remember watching people in the congregation anticipate – with eagerness and perhaps trepidation - being handed the child and the moment of joy and connection that offered the person, the child, the parents, and the congregation. It was particularly moving when the congregation member was one of the older members – a symbol of the gap bridged between young and old, innocent and wise, growing and dying.

And here we turn back to the scripture passage – to Simeon and Anna.

The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he saw the Lord's Christ, giving us a sense that he is an old man who has been waiting a long time for this day. And here we are reminded that Jesus is no ordinary child. As Simeon gathers the newborn into his arms – his old fingers perhaps stroking the baby's new, smooth cheek – he praises God and sings:

²⁹ “Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word,
³⁰ because my eyes have seen your salvation.
³¹ You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.
³² It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles
 and a glory for your people Israel.”

Can you imagine Simeon’s joy? It echoes the joy of Mary and Elizabeth, of Zechariah, the angels, and the shepherds. Salvation has come – not just for some, but for all, Jews and Gentiles alike - and now Simeon can be at peace. Tidings of Comfort and Joy for him.

And Mary and Joseph are amazed, we are told, by Simeon’s words. Amazed? But they knew Jesus was special. Perhaps they are amazed by the knowledge of this stranger who confirms more than what Mary and Joseph already know. Perhaps they are amazed because even the Gentiles are included in salvation.¹

As if the idea of Jesus being the salvation of all people isn’t enough to consider, Simeon turns to Mary and it is about to get real. He says that this boy – this tiny child in his arms, this son of Mary and son of God is going to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and a sign that generates opposition. Not only that, Simeon tells Mary that a sword will pierce her innermost being too – and the thoughts of many will be revealed.

Wait just a minute. Mary has been pondering the words of the shepherds who told her of the Angels singing glory to God and proclaiming peace among those with whom God is pleased. What is going on?

The Rev. Dr. Joy J. Moore, Academic Dean of Luther Seminary helps make sense of this. She says

The presence of the long-expected one granted sufficient peace, that the prophetic announcement of impending opposition and suffering could not diminish the joy Simeon experienced by the promise fulfilled.²

And who can know this better than this old man who has seen life, witnessed opposition and suffering, been restored by the rituals of the temple, and who is waiting to die.

I wonder what was going through Mary and Joseph’s minds. The joy and fear of being new parents, the parents of Jesus – this child, this significant child – who will bring peace to them, to a weary world, and who are now also told will bring opposition and suffering.

There is not time for them to think, because Luke tells us “at that very moment” Anna arrives and begins to praise God, and speak about Jesus to everyone . Like Mary and

¹ Jirair Tashjian, <http://www.crivoice.org/luke2c.html>

² Joy J. Moore, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas-2/commentary-on-luke-222-40>

the shepherds, Anna is an unexpected choice in the story of one come to bring salvation. She, not Simeon, is a prophet. A prophet who has been a prophet most of her life. She too, in her age and wisdom understands the joy of Simeon and she is telling everyone – living into her prophetic voice she is proclaiming the arrival of redemption – even as she hears Simeon’s words about opposition and suffering. She has spent the majority of her life in the rituals of her faith and it seems they have opened her to this moment.

A baby, young parents, an old man, and old woman, and other people of faith are gathered in the temple, coming to the place of the roots of their faith, and they are joined together in the witness of this child, Jesus, Emmanuel, prince of peace.

So it is too that we gather this morning, young and old, to the ritual of worship where we are reminded that there is rejoicing to be had in a weary world when we gather together and move through the rituals of our faith. When, as a congregation, we join in the baptismal vows and promise to support even infants as they grow in their faith. When we come to the table, all of us welcome, and partake of the ritual of communion. When, as a congregation, we join in praising God, confession and pardon, passing the peace, reading scripture, hearing the Word Proclaimed, giving of tithes and offerings, praying and singing, we are grounded again in God’s hope, peace, joy, and love. When our lives and the world feel thrown into chaos, when it seems that opposition and suffering are the order of the day, we come to the rituals of worship and prayer, bible study and fellowship, small group gatherings, Sunday school and youth group. We come and are reminded that peace and joy are wrapped around opposition and suffering, and embodied in the one we call Messiah.

Luke reveals that God is with us by attending to these persons and practices of Jesus infancy. God could have shown up as an adult. Instead, God came as a baby, born as we are born, growing up like us – surrounded by practices and people who guide us as we grow. As Simeon and Anna did for Mary, Joseph and Jesus, we need elders to remind us that being rooted in the community and rituals our faith helps us meet the weary world with hope, with comfort, and with joy. To remind us that we are not alone, and that we are all waiting for God’s redemption and new way of being. As Jesus did for Simeon and Anna, we are reminded that our waiting is not in vain. Our devotion is not in vain. Our worship, fasting, and prayer, are not in vain.

How does a weary world rejoice? We root ourselves in the rituals of our faith and we do so bound together, young and old and in-between, reminded at table and font that we belong to God, and through Christ and in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit we find hope, peace, joy, and love enough for us and enough for all.

Amen.