

Simeon and Anna

This is one of those really lovely stories about Jesus that is always heartwarming to hear. There is something familiar and comforting about the image of two old people at the house of worship, clucking over a new baby and giving unsolicited advice to young parents. The actual words of their adoration and their advice are, of course, a little different in this special case but the outline of the story seems homey and ordinary to us just the same. For some, the actual words of Simeon's prayer of praise may be familiar, too. These words have been used for centuries in the Church as part of the service of Compline, or evening prayer. If you've never heard a Compline service in medieval English plainsong, I heartily recommend the weekly service at St. Mark's Episcopal Cathedral on Capitol Hill. Every Sunday night at 9:30, the sanctuary is full to overflowing with a mostly college-aged congregation to hear a men's choir sing a setting of evening prayers that dates back to the time of Shakespeare. It is a beautiful ritual.

This scripture has not only given rise to a worship ritual, it is also in part about rituals that point to humankind's relationship with God. You may have noticed as you heard or read the passage earlier, that Luke makes several references to the idea that Joseph and Mary were scrupulous in fulfilling the rituals of the Law of Moses on behalf of themselves and their child. Luke is making it absolutely clear to his Gentile readers that Jesus was a faithful Jew from first to last, that God's Good News for all people was coming through God's Chosen People. In accordance with the Law, Jesus is circumcised, his mother is purified from the blood of childbirth, and Jesus is presented to God. Some commentators think that Luke has mixed two of those rituals together, the purification and the presentation, because although he mentions the prescribed sacrifice for purification, he doesn't say anything about the 5 shekels of silver that were to be given to the priest to "ransom" the first-born male child back from God. I'm not so sure. I think perhaps that 5 shekels was never paid, that Mary and Joseph instead dedicated the baby to the service of God, just as Hannah did with Samuel. Or Luke may have simply been making a point. Jesus couldn't be "bought back" from God. He always belonged completely to God. He, himself, was the ransom for all of humanity.

Jesus is circumcised, marked forever as a descendant of Abraham and a worshipper of Yahweh in the tradition of Moses. A sacrifice is made on Mary's behalf because the birth of a child involves blood and all blood is holy to Yahweh and a price for its shedding must be paid. The baby is brought to the Temple for dedication and blessing. All of these were familiar and comforting rituals for Mary and Joseph, patterns of behaviour ordained by God for special and possibly unsettling transition times in life. For the young couple, they were a reminder that generations had experienced what they had experienced and that a loving God had made provision for them. In his commentary on this passage in The New Interpreter's Bible, Alan Culpepper reflects on the importance of rituals: "Essential to Judaism is the praise of God in all of life. The Jewish law taught that God was to be honored in one's rising up and lying down, in going out and coming in, in how one dressed and what one ate. . . ." Culpepper goes on to note that the cultivation and observance of ritual has almost vanished from the modern world: "For many, religious rituals are reduced to church attendance at Christmas and Easter and to socially required ceremonies at births, weddings, and funerals. The marking of both daily and special events with rituals that recognize the sacredness of life and the presence of God in the everyday is practically extinct. In the minds of many it is associated either with superstitions and cultic practices of the past or the peculiar excesses of religious fanatics. The result has been that God has receded from the awareness and experience of everyday life... Daily experiences are

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reduced and impoverished. They have no meaning beyond themselves, no opening to transcendence... The challenge to modern Christians, therefore, is to find effective rituals for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary. We need to learn to greet the morning with gratitude; to celebrate the goodness of food, family, and friendship at meals; to recognize mystery in beauty; and to mark rites of passage... Rituals are not restrictive; they celebrate the goodness and mystery of life.”

I might add to what Dr. Culpepper writes that at their best, rituals are not restrictive. Some rituals do manage to ossify and lose their living meaning. But no ritual should be assumed to be dead and meaningless until it is experienced and some rituals have more meaning for some people than others. Here at Good Shepherd Baptist, we have our own set of longstanding rituals and traditions and together we continue to renew and honor those. Finding more ways to open ourselves to transcendence, as Alan Culpepper put it, to awaken ourselves to the presence of God in our lives, is very much what we are about here.

In addition to Luke’s focus on the faithful Jewishness of Jesus and his upbringing, a couple of other common Lukan themes show up in this story. For one, Jesus is shown from the very beginning to be in solidarity with those on the margins of society: the very young, the very old and the poor. There can be no doubt that Jesus and his family were poor. When the offering is made for Mary’s purification, it is not the preferred sacrifice of a dove and a lamb, but of two doves, the lesser sacrifice mandated for the poor. The life of a subsistence farmer in first century Judaea would have been hard, but that of a craftsman might well have been worse. For a man to be a carpenter in those days meant that the land he owned, if any, would not support him. Instead, he would generally barter his skills for produce, of which his neighbors might have barely enough to support themselves. If Joseph had been well-established as a master craftsman, to have a regular clientele or customers seeking his work from around the region, he surely would have sacrificed a lamb for his wife. Instead, he likely had only the meager income from repairs and rough work common to an insignificant village. And while he may have had a fair amount of work after the family’s return to Nazareth, thanks to the ongoing construction in the nearby city of Sepphoris, it certainly appears that his resources were severely restricted at the time of Jesus’ birth. The Good News to the poor is a common subject in Luke’s Gospel, more so than in any of the other Gospels. Luke was acutely aware that the Good News was being preached to the poor by a poor man.

Luke also gives more time in his Gospel to the stories of women than do the other evangelists, so it seems very fitting in this story that he pairs Simeon with Anna, two superannuated saints. My picture of Simeon is of a very old man, one of those old coots who is simply too stubborn to die until he is darn good and ready. As for Anna, she is at least very old and perhaps incredibly old. The scripture can be and has been read in two different ways. Based on verse 37, she is at least 84. The highest estimation I’ve seen for life expectancy for peasants in first century Palestine was 36, the lowest 25. From either figure, Anna is *old!* And that scripture has also been interpreted over the years to say not that she was 84 years of age, but that she’d been a widow for 84 years. Figure a marriage at around 13-14 and the comment that she’d lived with her husband for seven years and our friend Anna is about 104! In the infancy narratives in Luke, the special nature of Jesus is recognized by his unborn cousin John (who leaps in the womb of his aged mother), by the marginal shepherds, and by two other old people, Zechariah and Elizabeth. If we

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measure Jesus' adherents by the standards of world, this is not an auspicious beginning. It stands as a reminder to us that God does not always choose who the world would choose. Instead, God makes use of those who are open to God's presence, those who are seeking God.

As Luke makes clear, both Simeon and Anna are very much in an active state of seeking God. Simeon, Luke writes, was waiting for the consolation of Israel. Anna is among those who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Both of these phrases are connected in the Hebrew Scriptures with the advent of the Messiah and both have some further resonance in the story of Jesus. The word "consolation" in Luke's Greek is same used in the Greek version of the Old Testament to translate Isaiah 40: "Comfort, comfort ye my people." It's also a form of the same Greek word that the Gospel of John uses when recounting Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit to the disciples: "I will pray to the Father and he will send you another Comforter who will stay with you forever." Luke tells us that the two disciples on the road to Emmaus told the stranger they encountered that they, like Anna, had been looking for the one who would be the redemption of Israel. Unlike Anna, they didn't recognize him when they saw him.

Perhaps, in their grief, those two disciples lacked the composure, wisdom and clear-eyed courage of old age, attributes which Simeon and Anna possessed. In what Peter B. Price, the Anglican Bishop of Bath and Wells calls, "true radicalism," these two most senior adults are not only expecting God to act in history, they are wide-awake to the signs around them in ordinary life, like a peasant couple with a baby to dedicate. They also, Price writes, "recognized the nature of the opposition and the devastating impact of prophetic living upon loved ones." In his hymn of praise to God and his prophecy to Mary, Simeon expresses two concepts that would have never crossed the mind of the average zealous Jew in speaking of the Messiah. First, that the Lord's anointed one comes as a blessing for the Gentiles as well as for the Jews. The conventionally religious do not have exclusive rights to the glory of God. Again, God comes to those to whom God comes, not to those to whom people think God should come. Secondly, the Messiah's coming will not be received with joy by all who expect it. Some who think they will be on the Messiah's "A-list" have a shock coming to them. And finding themselves in opposition to the Christ, they will oppose him, his message and his followers with a will.

What Simeon sees so clearly is that Jesus is a threat. Jesus will reveal the secret thoughts of many and that is rarely a comfortable process. Many people believed in Jesus and received healing from him as a result of his ability to see into their souls. The Samaritan woman ran and told her neighbors, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I have ever done. He must be the Messiah." But the rich young ruler went away unfulfilled, because he loved his wealth more than wholeness. The Pharisees hated him because he saw through their elaborate piety to their desire to control the people. The high priests and scribes decided Jesus was too much of a threat, because he called them out for what they were – corrupt leaders more concerned with their own prestige than with the welfare of the people. And Pilate acquiesced to his death because he knew that Jesus really could tell him what truth was and he didn't want to hear it.

The message and life of Jesus continues to have this effect today. So many people turn away from the Good News because they do not want their lives to be altered so radically. They want to continue to live in their illusions about themselves, about others, about the world, rather than to face the truth. For some people, the word of Jesus causes their thoughts to be touched and

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their souls to be pierced and their response is anger rather than relief. Some people oppose the work that Jesus calls us all to, because following would mean that they weren't self-sufficient, that they didn't have all the answers, that they weren't really right with their Creator or their neighbors. Some people won't accept wholeness because first they would have to admit that they were broken.

Simeon sees this future. He sees the future of this tiny baby, the anointed of God. He sees that he will be the light of all nations and the glory of God's people. And he also sees the suffering, for the man the baby will become, for his mother, for those who will not see the light. But Simeon knows, as does Anna, in the wisdom of old age, that God holds the reins of history and so all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well. And so, Simeon and Anna greet the future of God's people with joy. And so are we called to our future, now in our present, in a ritual from 2000 years in the past. We are called to Christ's table with joy, for we can set aside brokenness for wholeness, sin for redemption, sorrow for consolation. Let us come with joy.