

## Year B, First Sunday after Christmas – Luke 2:22-40

This is the holy gospel according to Luke.

**Glory to you, O Lord.**

When 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 (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.”

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.

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

This is the gospel of the Lord.

**Praise to you, O Christ.**

## **Sermon**

For months we have been hearing Christmas music in stores. For months we have been buying presents and booking flights and scheduling holiday parties and looking forward to seeing loved ones. For months we have been thinking, planning, stressing, hoping.

And now... it's over. Our savior was born right on schedule, on December 25<sup>th</sup>, and now the world is moving on. Actually, it only took two days for my mother to bring up boxes from the basement so we could put all the Christmas ornaments away. If you look up and down the street this week, you'll see people unwinding their lights, putting away their decorations, tucking dying trees at the curb. For the world, Christmas is over.

But for the church, we are right in the middle of it.

We are gathered today right in the middle of the season of Christmas. We still have the candles, the manger, the incense. We are still celebrating.

But it's harder now – harder than it was last week. Last week there was a thousand candles and champagne and a huge crowd to celebrate with, and this week... no champagne, no crowd. People are tired, and many are still far from home. This is a tender time. Indeed, on this day of the liturgical year, on this day in our congregational life, “the cost of gift giving has been more than some [people] can bear.” Pastor Shelley Copeland wrote, “Some families entered the sacred season with great expectations only to discover

it was not what they thought it was.” Therefore the season of Christmas “is the time beyond means and beyond expectations.”<sup>1</sup>

What is true for us now was true for Mary and Joseph back then. Luke tells us that the holy family has been very busy – at the beginning of Mary’s pregnancy they journeyed from where they lived in Nazareth to Jerusalem to meet Elizabeth, then they went to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, then they carried their newborn baby back to Nazareth where they stayed at home so Mary could heal.

I think it’s safe to say that Mary and Joseph were physically and emotionally exhausted. Yeah, sure, they had that really cute manger scene with the shepherds and stuff, but then they had to go back home, and they were alone. New parents, looking down at their baby who was named by an angel and called the anointed one of God, and yet he looked like any other baby. He was tiny and fragile and he got sick and hungry and cried. I wonder how many nights he screamed with colic. I wonder if anyone brought them food. I wonder if Mary worried that he would die young, as many babies did in those days.

In our story today, the baby Jesus is forty days old. He’s still a newborn – he’s tiny. He can’t hold his head up yet, or focus his eyes. But, officially, it’s the time to go. So they left home yet again to take Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem and present him to God, according to the laws of Moses.

---

<sup>1</sup> from Shelley D.B. Copeland’s article in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 1*, “Homiletical Perspective on Luke 2:22-40.”

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph brought with them a sacrificial offering, to be presented to a priest at the temple of the Lord. The law of Moses that they were following is from Leviticus, chapter 12. The law says that when a baby is presented, the parents are to offer a young lamb and a dove to a priest who will then sacrifice it on their behalf to God. But Mary and Joseph could not afford a lamb and a dove. Luke says they brought along two pigeons. This was the sacrifice that was appointed to people were living in destitute poverty.

God's only son, the king of the world, born to human parents who couldn't afford to fulfill the social and financial expectation of their religion. Mary and Joseph faced a painful reality that many poor people of faith face today – this reality that full participation in temple life, full participation in church life, requires an expenditure of resources of money and time and energy that you don't always have to spare.

Somehow, they made the journey. Somehow they found a few copper coins to buy pigeons to be sacrificed. But something strange happened when they finally arrive at the temple.

Simeon, a devout man of God who spent much time in the temple, had been told that he would not die until he saw with his own eyes the messiah. And when he saw these two young parents walk in, holding their baby, holding two pigeons in a cage, he would have known that they were parents coming to present their baby, and that they were extremely poor. Yet Simeon can hardly wait until Mary and Joseph have crossed the threshold of the temple – he interrupts them, keeps them from walking by

and finding a priest to do the ceremony snatches the newborn Jesus out of Mary's arms and says, "My God, with my own eyes I have seen your salvation, that you have prepared in the presence of all the people." Our English translation says that Mary and Joseph were "amazed" by what he said, but actually the Greek word means something more like *bewildered*.

Then the prophet Anna comes over and does the same thing, cooing over the baby, telling everyone around them that this child right here, this is the messiah! This is the one who will redeem Israel!

You can imagine the worry that must have come over Mary and Joseph as suddenly everyone in the temple was watching them. Suddenly everyone was watching these teenage parents from Nazareth, this baby, who Simeon said was "destined for the falling and rising of many." What will happen next?

There's something so profound about this moment. Because God could have come to earth as a fully formed man. God could have just shown up, riding a warhorse like a warrior, or maybe dressed in jewels and wearing a crown like a king.

But instead, the first time that God Almighty came to Jerusalem was as a newborn baby, forty days old, in fulfillment of the law, identified as the messiah, but not the one they were waiting for. Not the one who was going to crush the Romans or sweep in with his army. God arrived powerless, utterly powerless, in his mother's arms.

You know the way that we talk to babies – that sort of sing-songy voice, the soft tone, the careful body language? Studies have shown that people from all cultures do this, this phenomenon exists across all known languages. This is a physiological reaction, it is hardwired into who we are – humans instinctively treat infants with tenderness and affection and love. As a biologist by training I can tell you that this is not a given in the animal world. Yet we humans – when a baby is born into our families, when a baby is brought into our church, we wonder how we can help, how we can be part of their experience in the world, how we might change our postures and our voices and our expressions and our words in order to keep this precious little being safe, comfortable and content.

It is human nature for us to assume a posture of gentleness around infants. And what a wonderful way for God to reveal God's self to the people.

Dear people, this season of Christmas is for dwelling in the joy of God's presence and the hope of God's salvation. That doesn't mean that you can't be sad or afraid or empty. But... just for now... set your worries on the ground without holding them for awhile. Just for now, set them down and set your heart on the infant Jesus instead. Because this is the time for soft words, for gentleness, for tenderness, and for hope.

Please pray with me. These words are from Jan Richardson.<sup>2</sup>

So may we know the hope  
that is not just for someday  
but for this day—

---

<sup>2</sup> from Jan Richardson's poem "Blessing of Hope" in her book *The Cure for Sorrow*.

here, now,  
in this moment that opens to us:  
hope not made  
of wishes  
but of substance,

hope made of sinew  
and muscle  
and bone,

hope that has breath  
and a beating heart,

hope that will not  
keep quiet  
and be polite,

hope that knows  
how to holler  
when it is called for,

hope that knows  
how to sing  
when there seems  
little cause,

hope that raises us  
from the dead—

not someday  
but this day,  
every day,  
again and  
again and  
again.