

Sermon for Sunday, December 29th, 2024

Luke 2:21-38

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Every Sunday from now through Easter we will be reading Scripture lessons from the gospel of Luke. Every gospel author has a specific audience and purpose for writing their version of the story of Jesus' life. Not all of them tell us their purpose as specifically as Luke does. This is what he says, "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."

With this understanding we step beyond the beloved Christmas story to the next story that Luke shares with us—a story that is not included in any of the other gospels. The story is sometimes called "The Presentation of Jesus." (*Pause*)

Waiting. I suspect that all of us know what it's like to wait. As a child I remember waiting for Christmas eve. But not just for the day; waiting for Dad to come in from milking cows, waiting for our meal to be complete, waiting for the dishes to be done (mom insisted!) And then, finally we would open presents. Sometimes I think my parents plotted to delay present opening for as long as possible just to irk me! But in the midst of this waiting I also knew pretty much when present opening was going to happen. I had a date and a rough idea of the time.

In today's reading we have two people who have been waiting for a long, long time. Harder still is that while they know what they are waiting for, they don't know a specific day nor the time. It could be today, it could be tomorrow, it could be next week, it could be next year. It is only by faith that they trust the message from God that they are actually going to see the Messiah, the Savior. Waiting in that way for an unspecified date must have been a challenge.

Simeon was one who was familiar with waiting. As far as we know Simeon was just a regular guy. We don't really know his age or his profession. The Bible tells us that "the Holy Spirit rested on him"

and that the Spirit had revealed to him "that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah." So he had a bit of knowledge fed by the Holy Spirit, that helped him to continue faithfully waiting. But he still had to wait and to continue to live life in the meantime....

It's intriguing to imagine him waking each morning and spending time in prayer. In that prayer time he might say, "Okay God. Is today the day? Do you want me to go to work or do something else?" I suspect that there were many days when the answer was, "Not today, Simeon. Go to work." But then there came a day when, as the Bible tells us, he was guided by the Holy Spirit to go to the Temple. While there he saw Mary and Joseph holding a pretty new baby and preparing to offer the ritual sacrifices as directed in the Torah.

It's a wonder to me that Simeon, as far as we know a complete stranger, takes the baby in his arms and exclaims, "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." Note the broadness of Simeon's declaration. This child is to be a light to the Gentiles as much as to the people Israel.

Anna is another character in today's reading that knows about waiting. She is acknowledged as a prophet and as such her job is to deliver messages from God. She is also very old for Bible times: 84 years old is truly ancient! Anna reiterates Simeon's message, indicating that this child would bring redemption to the people Israel. Jewish people, in particular, would have paid attention to her message since she was considered one of their prophets. But she, like all Jews has been in a state of waiting for the Messiah to arrive all of her long life.

This difference between the two messages is notable although not significant. As I said, Anna's words are especially for the people Israel. Simeon exclaims that Jesus will reveal God's glory not only to the people Israel, but also to everyone else; those labelled Gentiles. This is good news for us who should consider ourselves Gentiles. The good news of the birth of Jesus our Savior is for everyone, including us.

And the waiting is over because the long-awaited Messiah has arrived! That's the message from these two people who have waited so long: the Savior of the world is here!

The gospel-writer Luke is eager to present a picture of pious Jews in today's reading. Mary and Joseph observe the Law's requirements; Simeon is "righteous and devout" and knows the Scriptures; and Anna is ever-present in the temple, worshiping, praying, and fasting. Each witnesses God's salvation in the child Jesus.

So how should today's Scripture reading impact us? What difference will it make in our lives, here and now?

It is tempting to jump to the conclusion that God is rewarding the piety of Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna by allowing them to recognize God's saving work in baby Jesus. The implication might be that if we were as pious as those four people we too would experience similar rewards from God. (WP) However, rather than God rewarding the piety of Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna, we see that their religious devotion, practiced in knowing the Scriptures and living out their faith in ritual acts, makes them perceptive and opens them to God's activity in their lives and the world. The simple religious practices of their lives made it possible for them to recognize God's work in the world.

That's perhaps the most important message for us today. We have a God who is recognizable. We have a God who came to earth as a baby and was recognized as the Messiah by real people, long before this infant had spoken a word or delivered a miracle. We have a God who submitted himself to the rites and rituals of the day so as to demonstrate his total integration into the human world.

God hasn't given up on humanity. God proved that by sending Jesus to earth as a newborn child. And while we do not have human Jesus here on earth today, we have the Holy Spirit residing among us. God's Spirit allows us to recognize and appreciate God's presence in our lives and in our world. The exciting part is that recognizing God at work inspires one to be a partner with God for the good of the people of our world. God trusts us to do the right thing.

On this the last Sunday of 2024 I close with a wonderful poem by Howard Thurman: a poem that I hope will inspire you to act with confidence in the new year.

THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

Let it be so, dear Lord, let it be so among us.