

Beholding Emmanuel

Sunday, December 31, 2023

Luke 2:22-40

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In these beautiful postscripts to Christmas, Luke challenges us to behold the grace of God's steadfast faithfulness and love.

There are so many traditions around New Years. In our house New Year's day is celebrated with pork and sauerkraut. A sprinkling of brown sugar and caraway seeds top the soured cabbage and surround the pork roast as a way to start the new year. For Asian families, New Year's celebrations might include succulent dumplings. Others of you will enjoy black eyed peas – and may I say, God bless you if you do. A good friend of ours, who was perhaps the best cook I have ever known, offered to help us learn the proper way to celebrate New Year's Day with Hoppin' John, collard greens and cornbread. Another tradition we've learned about is eating pickled herring for good luck—but it is worth considering how that good luck turned out for the fish.

Like our New Year's celebrations, these stories of Mary and Joseph and Jesus are filled with tradition. Luke offers us a beautiful postscript to Christmas this morning, filling us with insights about Mary and Joseph's obedience to the law of Moses in presenting their son at the temple. Luke's narrative begins a bit like those old-time television announcers whose voice would end a special breaking news report. "We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming," he booms, and suddenly the angels are gone, the shepherds have returned home. All we see is a poor family making their way to Jerusalem.

"When the time came," Luke announces, as if to adjust our expectations, "they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord."

Luke packs this section with reminders of Jewish customs and traditions as a way of pointing to Mary and Joseph's faithfulness to the law. We're reminded that they comply with the requirements to have him circumcised on the eighth day, and that they then returned to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. Jewish law mandated that every firstborn male child be redeemed, or "brought back" from God. It was a ritual which had originated in the Passover, when the angel "passed over" the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt. The Passover was a reminder of how God had claimed every firstborn male. Obedience to that commandment required that parents enter the temple and offer a sacrifice to God. He who will become the

sacrifice for the world is redeemed by offering of two turtledoves, which was the customary offering for a poor family.

When the time came, Luke tells us, Mary and Joseph returned to Jerusalem to do as the law commanded them. It's a story of tradition and faithfulness.

The memory of these sorts of rituals and traditions lives deep within families. When our children were young, our family tradition was that no one went downstairs on Christmas morning until everyone was awake. No matter how early you awoke, you had to wait for everyone. Our children will tell you my adherence to this tradition was insufferable. Invariably exhausted by Christmas Eve, I was rarely the first one out of bed on Christmas morning. And sometimes I played this to my advantage. They would find it irritating by my slow rising. On some mornings, I would rise like a zombie climbing out of a grave, one limb at a time even as the kids were jumping up and down the bed. I would rummage around searching for clothes, irritating them to no end. "Does this shirt go with these pants?" I'd ask. "Have you seen my brown socks?" I might even go and turn on the shower for extra effect. At that point, one of the kids would shout, "That's it! I've had it! I'm going downstairs!"

These are the rituals of family life, the customs that help us grow in love. We can imagine something similar taking place as Mary and Joseph trudge along the pathway to the temple. We do not have any photographic evidence, but it's not hard to imagine this little family making their way from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. We don't have any Facebook posts of an exhausted Mary glowing over the newborn Jesus, nor do we have a picture of Joseph handing out cigars to his friends that say, "For unto us a child is born! It's a Savior!" In fact, the truth is the bulk of the New Testament does not give us much information about Jesus' nativity and childhood.

But we do have this story from Luke.

It's a story that offer us an important invitation on this last day of the year. As we turn the page on 2023 today, we are reminded of what it looks like to ground ourselves in faith that goes beyond hard, cold facts. It is a story of watching Simeon and Anna cradle the unimaginable possibilities of God in their arms, as Madeline L'Engle once wrote, a remarkable, beyond-the-bounds of ordinary possibility moment. "Was it perhaps because they were so old, so near to the Beyond, that they were able to see what people caught up in the cares of life could not see?" wonders L'Engle.

It is entirely possible. “When the time came,” Luke intones, these two ancient children of Israel behold what others could not see. Their ancient eyes, occluded by cataracts and dried from years of weeping and praying, behold the sight of God incarnate, realizing that hope has been born into a world of routines and traditions.

It’s a new moment, something they had both been longing to experience, but had somehow come to expect might never happen. Devoted to God, they had remained faithful in their expectation, praying and waiting for the light which was to come. Perhaps nothing captures this sense of longing, this deep hunger, better than John in the first chapter of the Gospel:

That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. ¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. ¹¹ He came unto his own, and his own received him not. ¹² But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:

¹³ Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴ And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (King James’ Version)

There was no photographer, but we can imagine Simeon reaching toward the child. We see the confused and amazed looks on Mary and Joseph’s faces as they watch this elderly man’s bony arms and arthritic hands extend to behold their baby. His liver spotted hands trace the contours of Jesus’ sweet, soft face. His life, now complete, is filled with a peace that cannot be explained.

Likewise, old Anna, a woman whom Luke tells us had never left the temple, worshipping there day and night, catches a glimpse of the child. She is filled with a fervor that overtakes her; his voice filled with praise. The sight of the Savior changes her so that she goes and tells everyone she meets what she has seen. It’s the story she tells every time her family gathers, every time she meets friends for coffee. The sight of the child has filled her with good things—just as Mary had predicted.

There is deep power in beholding. Barbara Brown Taylor once quipped that “at this time of the Christian year, worship services feature narratives that stretch credulity to the limit. Whether the stories star hayseed shepherds confronted by hosts of glittering angels or deserving pilgrims watching something like a dove descend upon a man in a river as a voice from heaven calls him son, this is the season of beholding things beyond belief.”

It is a gift of grace that feeds our hungry souls, even as it fed Anna and Simeon. It is a gift that will change us—if we allow ourselves to understand that, as Taylor says, “the most important things in life cannot be explained.”

As we turn the page on this old, tired year, the images of these two elderly sages of Israel brings us promise. We quickly discount the wisdom of the aged. Our culture always prefers the energy and beauty of the young. But here Luke reminds us that the gift of wisdom is possessed by those who have waited, whose eyes have experienced years of struggle, whose bodies are weary but whose souls are filled with faith.

There are lessons that I believe Simeon and Anna can teach us. One is that their sense of anticipation of God’s coming has been formed not because of their individual spiritual journeys, but through their participation in a community. Their lives have been spent yearning for God to come—but that yearning has been shaped by faithfulness in worship, prayer, and gathering in a community.

Simeon knows that his life is not defined by the isolating effects so often experienced in our culture. Not long ago I was called to the scene of a tragic death of an older person. I do not know his story, but it is not hard to imagine that like so many, his life was filled by the pangs of loneliness and a feeling of not being part of a community. Yet such community was at the heart of Simeon and Anna’s lives. And it was his participation in community that allows Simeon to prepare for his own death by singing:

"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."

Secondly, they have remained open to the possibilities of beholding God’s gift of peace. They are not worn down by the worries, anxieties, or agony which surrounds them. And they remain open to the incredulous ways that gift might appear. Simeon’s longing for the consolation of Israel is fulfilled not by a powerful ruler, one who exerts great strength, but in the face of a helpless baby. Pastor and poet Daniel Evans reflects on the possibilities of such moments through the experiences of baptizing children. As he begins the baptismal liturgy, Evans says he “thinks of Anna or old Simeon, lifting up a blushing Mary’s baby, all awash in wonder to be holding God in hand.”

No one notices the baby except for these two elderly prophets. It is a beautiful story that reminds us to listen to the wisdom of our elders, and to seek the blessing they wish to give us.

There was no photographer around, but we have all the details we need. We can see old Simeon, his body bent over by age and arms dotted with age spots, and his eyesight occluded by cataracts. His mouth forms a broad smile filled with peaceful delight as he holds the newborn. As Jesus coos, Simeon's finger glides across the baby's face. The old man's arthritic hands blend with Jesus' soft skin. It is a blessing, the old man says, over and over again, such a remarkable blessing. Here is the one for whom he had longed. Here is the one who brings Israel's hope and consolation. Simeon's gnarled fingers curl around the flesh of God.

"My eyes have seen your salvation," Simeon murmurs, as if no one else was listening. "A light for the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel." May that be so for us. Amen.