

Luke 2:21-40 (NRSV)

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,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³²a 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.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Christmas is a season of waiting.

The younger we are, the longer the waiting seems to last. But Simeon and Anna have been waiting too – for their whole lives. Now, their Christmas has come.

Today’s passage completes Jesus’ birth narrative which began with Luke’s familiar Christmas story that we read reach Christmas Eve. After all the angels and glorious proclamations at Jesus’ birth, we’d expect the story to go on to even more uplifting and glorious heights. Instead, Luke opens the door to the surprising role of suffering in the coming of God’s kingdom, a suffering grounded in hope and love.

Waiting and expecting

Simeon is old. He is righteous and devout, and pretty much just waiting to die. But he wants to live long enough to see the salvation of Israel. Simeon knew that things were not right. He needed only to look up at the Roman soldiers standing atop the Antonia Fortress to be reminded, for the fortress sat adjacent to the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem. Israel had suffered for so long. But now, the Holy Spirit assures Simeon that he will live to see the realization of his hope.

One day, on what must have felt a bit like an impulse, Simeon went to the temple. There, he saw a young woman, a girl really, with her husband. They were carrying a newborn into the temple to be consecrated. As soon as Simeon laid eyes on the child, he knew that he could die in peace, exclaiming, “For my eyes have seen your salvation.” Simeon was not speaking of his personal salvation. Salvation for the Jews had nothing to do with “getting to heaven” or any other path to personal redemption. Instead, the salvation for which Simeon had been waiting was the salvation of Israel and, hence, the world. The child, this Messiah-child, would be the fulfillment of God’s promise that

Redemption and Purification¹

Jewish Law prescribed certain rituals after childbirth. First, all male infants were circumcised on the eighth day after birth (verse 21).

Second, as a reminder of the Exodus (when the first born of Egypt died and the Israelites were redeemed out of their slavery), the first child born to a couple was consecrated to the Lord’s service. Then, the infant would be redeemed (bought back) at a price of five shekels. Luke notes Jesus’ consecration (verse 22 and 23) but makes no mention of Jesus’ redemption ritual. Perhaps Luke didn’t know all the specifics of Jewish Law and custom. Or, perhaps Luke wants to make the point that Jesus remained consecrated to the Lord, that his parents never redeemed him from the Lord’s service.

Purification of the mother was a third ritual. After the birth of a male child, the mother was ceremonially unclean for seven days and then went through a 33 day purification period. This period was twice as long for mothers of female infants. (Don’t ask me why!) While she was ritually unclean the mother could not enter the temple nor touch any holy object. After the 40 (or 80) days the mother was to offer to the Lord a lamb and either a pigeon or a turtledove. If the mother could not afford a lamb, she could instead offer two turtledoves or pigeons. Mary can offer only the two birds (verse 24).

Simeon and Anna encounter the infant Jesus when Mary brings him to the temple for his consecration (verse 27).

¹This is drawn from R. Alan Culpepper’s commentary on Luke in the New Interpreter’s Bible. This commentary set is in the St. Andrew library.

Israel would be redeemed from sin and restored to a right relationship with God. In other words, God had made a covenant with Israel and that covenant would be kept by the baby in Mary’s arms. And as had been promised to Abraham two millennia before (Genesis 12), all the world would be blessed through Israel. The baby was to be a light to the gentiles every bit as much as to the Jews.

Despite the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph were astounded by the appearance of this old man and what he had to say. But Simeon went on. The baby would create turmoil not peace. Many would speak against him. Jesus would reveal what is really in people’s hearts which is, of course, often not very pretty. And, in a statement that surely cut to Mary’s heart, Simeon saw suffering ahead, saying to the new mother, “A sword will pierce your own soul as well.” It might be all angels and adoration now, but the coming of God’s kingdom would exact a high price.

Speaking for God

As Mary and Joseph tried to make sense of what Simeon had said to them, they were approached by an old woman. Anna was eighty-four and had been a widow for about as long as she could remember. Anna had the gift of speaking God’s word to the people of God. She was one of God’s prophets and never left the temple.

Anna is overcome at the sight of the child. Like Simeon, she understands the meaning of this infant. Anna gives thanks to God and then uses her God-given gift

to proclaim this Good News to everyone in the temple who looked forward to the salvation of Israel – which meant everyone who could hear her. In Israel at the time, perhaps the only Jews who did not anxiously await Israel’s redemption were those who

had made their bed with the Romans, such as the Sadducees and other people of means who were doing quite well under Roman rule.

Seeing with clear eyes

Despite their age, Anna and Simeon see the child in Mary's arms with clear eyes. They see the truth and are delighted by it. They see the arrival of Israel's rescue in this tiny newly born infant. They see . . . and believe.

You and I, and Luke's readers, cannot see the Christ-child as did Simeon and Anna. We are called to believe, to have faith in, that which we cannot see. But there is more to knowing than seeing, or hearing, or tasting, or touching, or smelling. God's cosmos is larger and more mysterious than that. The baby in Mary's arms is larger and more mysterious still, the one in whom "all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible . . ." (Colossians 1:16), the one who would be "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5), the one whom "every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of the God the Father" (Philippians 2:11).

Can we see with clear eyes the truth of Christmas? Will we tell others this Good News?

Epiphany and the Wise Men

Next Sunday will be Epiphany Sunday. Traditionally, Epiphany is celebrated on January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas. The day focuses on the story of the wise men, all of whom were gentiles, and celebrates their worship of the Christ-child. In this, they represent the entire Gentile (non-Jewish) world, to whom the God's son has now been revealed. An "epiphany" is a revealing, or even the appearance or manifestation of a divine bearing. Here is a bit more on the magi.

The story is told in Matthew 2:1-12. "Wise men" in v.1 translates the Greek word, *magoi*, which literally means magicians. But these men were neither doers of tricks nor kings. Matthew never even says there were three. Because they came from the east, probably Babylonia, they were most likely astronomers and astrologers, readers of stars. Though they worked without telescopes, Babylonian astronomers were quite sophisticated in their understanding of the stars and planetary movement. Further, they believed that certain astronomical phenomena were signs of new kings, falling emperors, and other important events.

Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the star of Bethlehem – was it some sort of super-nova? An unusually bright star or planet? A conjunction of planets? Whatever it actually was, these magi saw in the "star" a sign that something incredibly important was happening – a king had been born -- and they traveled westward in search of the answer.

Sometime after Jesus was born, the magi arrive in Jerusalem, asking about this new king. King Herod hears about this and is frightened – after all, he is already King of the Jews, at least in the eyes of the Romans. Herod, and the rest of Jerusalem, know full well what is going on.

And now, Herod fears that a challenger to Herod's throne has been born and the wise men's journey lends immediate credibility to his claims. Herod responds as we might expect. He hatches a plan to eliminate the challenger. He first finds out when this child was born and then sends the wise men to find the child using the pretext that Herod would like to honor the child. The "wise" men seem pretty naïve, but they turn out to be truly wise.

Upon their arrival in Bethlehem, the magi are filled with joy, for they realize that they have found what they were looking for – the true king. They then proceed to do what we all must do when faced with the reality of Jesus; they fall on their knees in homage, offering the finest gifts that they could imagine. They are warned in a dream to avoid Herod and so they head home. In the verses that follow, we learn that Herod is enraged by the premature departure of the magi and orders the death of all infants younger than two years old in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Herod is determined to eliminate the threat, but an angel has warned Joseph who has fled to Egypt with his young family.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Today's Scripture passage is a good occasion to reflect on the place of ritual in the Church. Christians are all over the place on this. Many Pentecostals and Baptists have stripped virtually all ritual out of their churches. Many Roman Catholics and Orthodox, on the other hand, embrace rituals and liturgy which have been part of their churches for centuries.

What is the place of ritual observance in your own Christian life? Prayer before meals is an example of a ritual practiced each day by some Christians. Do you think of it as a ritual? Why or why not? What are some other examples? Alan Culpepper writes, "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 how one ate." The trouble was that such "requirements" could hide a darkened heart. Hypocrisy on the part of some, though, does not diminish the value of the practice.

Culpepper goes on to say, "We meet Christ in the ordinary experiences of life. . . . The challenge to modern Christians, therefore, is to find effective rituals for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary." How can we do this? Should we? What are some rituals we could practice that would celebrate the goodness of God and of life?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Jeremiah 23:1-8 A message of the restoration of Israel	Tuesday, Isaiah 53 The suffering servant of the Lord
Wednesday, John 1:1-34 The prologues to the gospel and the testimony of John the Baptizer	Thursday, Colossians 1:15-20 The supremacy of Christ
Friday, 1 Peter 2:1-10 Like newborn infants, we are to long for spiritual nourishment, for we are God's own people.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Coming in January

Scott's 11:00 Sunday class beginning Jan. 9

Good News for Anxious Christians:

Ten practical things you don't have to do to be close to God

Like the succession of failed diet regimens, the much-touted techniques that are supposed to bring us closer to God "in our hearts" can instead make us feel anxious, frustrated and overwhelmed. We'll uncover ten things we don't have to do to be close to God, unpacking the riches of traditional Christian spirituality to bring the *real* good news to Christians of all ages.

Scott's Monday Evening Bible Academy Class starting Jan. 24

Did Paul Really Hate Women?

Did Paul really teach that women aren't supposed to teach men? That they aren't to preach? That they are to cover their heads, take off their jewelry, and keep silent in church? That wives are to "submit" to their husbands? There are few NT passages that are more controversial than Paul's teachings about the role of women in church and in marriage. In this seven-week class, we'll examine women in the world of the earliest Christians and take a careful look at each of the key passages in Paul's letters, all while upholding the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

Scott's Tuesday Lunchtime Class (beginning Jan. 18)

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future

A fresh look at what the Bible has to say about the future, including the end-times, Christ's return, the so-called "rapture," and more. Our guide will be the much-acclaimed book of the same name by Craig Hill of Wesley Theological Seminary.