

The Light for the Gentiles

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

December 31, 2023

©2023 Scott L. Engle

Luke 2:22-40 (NRSV)

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,

³¹which 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.

The time is fulfilled. The light for the Gentiles has been revealed!

Today’s passage completes Jesus’ birth narrative which began with Luke’s familiar Christmas story that we read each 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 Israel would be redeemed from sin and restored to a right relationship

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 firstborn 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), illustrating something of Mary’s family economic situation.

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 twelve volume commentary set is in the St. Andrew library thanks to a generous donation.

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, not only from Jesus, but also his mother.

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, or nearly so. 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.

Doing what is required to see

Throughout the beginning to his Gospel, Luke has gone to great pains to show us that Jesus and his family carefully and lovingly observed the Jewish Law. This is particularly interesting in that Luke is the only NT writer who is not Jewish. You can't really see this in the English translations, but Luke's opening is even written in the style of the Old Testament.

Many Christians get the idea that Jesus came to oppose the Law and toss it out. But this is a misguided reading of Scripture. Jesus was not only the hope and consolation of Israel, he came to fulfill the Law.

Thus, Mary and Joseph, in their devotion to God and God's teachings, ensure that the infant Jesus is rightly received into the people of God, taking them right into the surprising and even disturbing encounters with Simeon and Anna.

In God's temple, Simeon and Anna both see the infant and, in this, they also see the future. They see the realization of long-harbored hope, even while Roman rule of the Jews continues.

While we are still in our Christmas glow, perhaps we should check our own vision. In the midst of difficulties do we really "see" the promise of the Christ-child, just as Simeon did? Are we ready to proclaim Christ to all we know, as Anna did?

Reading "All" of the Bible

We live in a world of sound-bites. Television news rarely gives us more than a five-second comment from newsmakers. The 60-second commercial is an historical artifact. All this makes us even more prone than our predecessors to read the Bible as little more than a collection of inspiring or informational snippets. Countless books at the Christian bookstore have done exactly that with the Bible. But such an approach to the Bible can lead us down some damaging paths.

As we start a new year, a good resolution would be to become a better reader of Scripture; not only to spend more time with the Bible, but to make a conscious effort to read it well.

Reading the Bible means guarding against chopping it up into ever smaller pieces or ignoring the portions that make us uncomfortable.

Every phrase in the Bible needs to be read as part of a sentence; each sentence as part of a paragraph, and each paragraph as part of a larger story or other literary unit. Each story needs to be read in the context of the larger book and each book as part of the entire Bible (or canon). I think you get my point. For example, yes, the Bible says "an eye for an eye." But it also says "turn the other cheek" and "forgive seventy times seven."

When we turn to the Bible seeking guidance on dealing with our enemies, or same-sex marriage, or money, or alcohol, or problems in the workplace, or any other topic of the day, we need to resist grabbing a brief phrase from Scripture, holding it up as God's single pronouncement from the Bible. The truth is that we can find something in the Bible that would seem to support any belief we might hold or any action we might take. As Methodists, we read the Bible as part of the believing community, aided by biblical scholarship and personal insights. We understand that there are better and poorer ways to interpret the Bible. Using the *entire* Bible, not just our favorite bits, is an essential part of reading Scripture responsibly.

Reading the Bible Better

Because we hold the Bible up as God's revelation and accord it authority over us and our community, it would be easy to turn the Bible into some sort of idol, proclaiming something like, "The Bible says it. I believe it. That's it." But it just isn't that simple. You don't have to spend much time around the Bible (or around Christians) to realize that a Bible verse can be found to support almost anything. So we need a method that can lead us toward better interpretations and away from pitfalls that have beset Christians from the beginning. I find particularly helpful a four-fold process suggested by Richard Hays of Duke Seminary, one of the foremost Pauline scholars.¹

Step 1. *Reading the text carefully* – What is actually on the page matters. The grammar matters. The context matters. If we hope to understand what a scripture passage means for us, we need to understand first what it meant to those for whom it was written. Hays calls this task "descriptive." It is the work of bringing out the meaning in the passage, being careful that we don't read things into the passage that aren't there. The purpose of these Background Studies is to help us all make sense of what is on the page.

Step 2. *Placing the text in the context of the entire Bible* – The page three text box talks about the need to bring the entire Bible to bear on our understanding of individual passages.

Step 3. *Bringing the text into our situation* – In time, culture, and language we live a long way from ancient Israel. Bridging the chasm between Abraham's day and our own is not easy. How do we take our moral bearings from these ancient writings? This task requires us to be imaginative and humble. The Bible simply isn't some sort of magic answer book that addresses directly all the difficulties in our professional and personal lives. The Bible gives us a framework, a story, within which we can seek God's guidance.

Step 4. *Living the text* – Of course, this is the really hard part. This is where Bible reading and study transcend an intellectual exercise, instead calling on every part of us to seek transformation and to be willing to put God's way to work in our lives, as a community of God's people. We are called not only to read the Bible; we are called to live it.

This is not a simple, sequential process. These four tasks overlap, weaving back and forth as we put them into practice. Still, keeping these four tasks before me as I study and read Scripture has been enormously helpful. It will help you too.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Numbers*

This class will not meet Jan 1

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Beginning January 9: The book of Acts

This class will not meet Jan 2

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This class will not meet Dec 31. We will resume on January 7 with a new series: *Her Story: Women Leaders in the Early Church*.

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.