

WHEN THE TIME COMES

Luke 2:21-40

Trinity Presbyterian Church
December 27, 2020
First Sunday after Christmas

On this first Sunday after Christmas our attention is drawn to an episode in the narrative of the birth of Jesus that we seldom consider. It is the story told in the second chapter of Luke's Gospel of Mary and Joseph bringing their son to the Temple in Jerusalem. I find two key elements in this passage that speak to me and I hope to you as well.

The first is the importance of tradition in our lives, in particular in our celebration of holy seasons like Christmas. The Gospel of Luke makes clear that in the rituals Mary and Joseph observe after the birth of Jesus they were following the traditions of their Jewish faith as set forth in the Torah, the Law of Moses.

First, in a tradition still observed by faithful Jews today after the birth of a boy, on the eighth day after his birth, the baby was circumcised and given his name, Jesus, which, as Luke, notes, was chosen for the child even before he was conceived.

Three more rituals took place, also when the time set forth in Jewish law had come.]. Forty days after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph entered the Temple in Jerusalem for the rite of purification of a new mother prescribed in the Book of Leviticus (12: 6-8). That ritual included a burnt offering; the sacrifice Mary made was that of the poor—not a lamb, which a wealthy mother would offer, but two pigeons and two turtledoves.

Mary and Joseph also performed in the Temple that day a ritual prescribed in the Book of Exodus (13: 2, 12-13) known as the redemption of the firstborn.

The third ritual in the Temple, also prescribed in Jewish tradition, was the dedication of the child to God. Mary and Joseph symbolically presented Jesus to God and committed themselves to raise him to serve the Lord.

Quite clearly, Mary and Joseph were faithful Jews, who followed the customs and rituals prescribed by the Law of Moses. We find here in Luke's telling clear evidence that from the beginning Jesus was raised according to Jewish tradition. When he was old enough to make his own decisions, Jesus continued on the path his parents had charted for him, following the commandments of the Law. He was, throughout his life, a faithful Jew.

In our celebration of the birth of Jesus, which continues today and extends until Epiphany on January 6th, we observe the traditions of our faith, as set forth in our holy texts. In particular, in our services here at Trinity we enact through word and song and sometimes drama, the miracle of our Savior's coming into the world. I hope you were able to view the lovely and moving Christmas Eve service. If you did not see it on Christmas Eve the service is available for viewing on Trinity's Facebook page, which you can access from the Church's web site.

This morning we observed a tradition drawn from the telling of the story of the birth of Jesus in the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols celebrated each Christmas Eve in Kings College Chapel at Cambridge University in England. That service begins with the singing of the carol with which we started our service, "Once in Royal David's City." As Steve did this morning, the Kings College choirmaster, selects one of the choristers to sing the first verse of the carol *a capella*, then the rest of the choir and congregation join in. Thank you, Steve, Joey, and Carol for honoring my request that we observe the Kings College tradition today.

In addition to celebrating Christmas here with our church family many of us observe the traditions of Christmas in our homes. Each year Sue and I light advent candles, read a series of advent devotionals, and sing Christmas carols. When our children were young, each Christmas eve we observed the tradition of enacting the story of the birth of Jesus. One year, our daughter, Rachel, who was five, played the role of one of the angels who announced to the shepherds the birth of the Christ child in Bethlehem. My father-in-law and I were the shepherds. Our role was to act terrified when the angel appeared and then be assured by her announcement and express our intent to go to Bethlehem and see for ourselves what the Lord had done. In a loud and clear voice, the five-year-old angel said, "Do not be afraid, for behold—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people, for to you is born this day in the City of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord." However, the shepherds, my father-in-law and I, were not listening; we had become distracted talking about the presents under the tree. So again, the angel said, in a louder voice, "Do not be afraid" No response. The shepherds were still not listening. A third time, the angel speaks. The shepherds do not respond. Finally, in a very exasperated tone, the angel shouts, "If you shepherds don't pay attention, you're not going to get the good news!" (pause) "If you shepherds don't pay attention, you're not going to get the good news!" That pretty much sums up the Christmas message, doesn't it? If we don't pay attention to the angel's announcement and, like the shepherds of old, go ourselves to Bethlehem and see with our own eyes the new born baby in the manger, who is the Son of God, the Savior of all, we will miss the true meaning of Christmas. So yes, observing the traditions of our faith during this Christmas season, here in church and in our homes, is important.

However, there is a second element in today's Scripture lesson we should also note. After performing the traditions called for in the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph encounter two prophets in the Temple who, empowered by the Holy Spirit, make unmistakably clear to them and to us the full significance of the birth of Jesus. These

prophets proclaimed the messages given to them when God's time came, and the Spirit spoke through them.

The first prophet is an old man named Simeon, who, Luke tells us, was righteous and devout. The Holy Spirit had come upon Simeon, revealing to him that he would not die until he had seen with his own eyes the Messiah, the Christ. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon had come into the Temple at the time Mary and Joseph were observing the rituals called for in the Law of Moses. When God's time came the Spirit revealed to the old prophet that this infant, who was being presented to the Lord in the Temple and dedicated to God's service, was no ordinary child; he was the Messiah for whom Simeon had been waiting so long. Simeon's response was not to observe a tradition of the Law. He was empowered by the Spirit, when he took the baby Jesus in his arms and began praising God, with words expressing the fulfillment of God's promise to him, and, drawing from another prophet, Isaiah (49:6), a promise to all people:

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word:
for my eyes have seen your salvation, which has been prepared in the presence
of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.

This is not only the proclamation of Simeon, it is one of the major themes in the Gospel of Luke. As the angels said to the shepherds outside Bethlehem (who were paying attention), "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." For all the people. For whoever opens their hearts to the message of God's salvation for all people through the coming of God's son into the world. Luke then tells us that Mary and Joseph, who had come to the Temple to observe the traditions of the Law of Moses, were amazed, overwhelmed by what Simeon has said. When God's time came the Spirit had come upon them as well. Their son was not theirs alone, but was the agent of salvation, not only for their people, Israel, but for all people. Then Simeon singles out Mary for a blessing, saying to her words that must have given her, as they do us, pause. Her son Jesus would bring salvation to all, but not without conflict and division. As the writer of the Gospel of Luke knew, when he told the story of Jesus, some among the people of Israel would receive him as their Messiah, but others would not, and, in a foreshadowing of what Mary experienced when Jesus was crucified, her soul would be pierced, as if by a sword.

The story could just have easily ended there, with that disconcerting comment, but, in Luke's telling it continues. There was another prophet in the Temple that day who, also, empowered by the Spirit, grasped and expressed the full meaning of the birth of Jesus. The prophet was Anna, who, like Simeon, was elderly. I find it interesting that in Luke's gospel two of the key players in the story of the birth of Jesus are, as we would say today, senior citizens. The gospel writer is making the point that God has work for those of us who are elderly to do, if we open ourselves to God's Spirit.

Another emphasis found throughout Luke's gospel, is the central role of women in the story of Jesus. At both the beginning, in his birth; throughout his ministry of teaching and healing; and at the end, at his crucifixion and resurrection, women,

according to Luke, play key roles. Here, in the birth narrative of Jesus, Luke draws our attention to his mother Mary, who was first to grasp the full significance of her son's coming into the world, and the prophet Anna, who also sees the redemptive meaning of the birth of this holy child.

Anna was 84, Luke tells us, and she had had a difficult life. After only seven years of marriage, she became a widow, which in the culture of the time meant existence on the margins of society, condemned to a life without meaning or purpose. However, Anna, had transcended the social stigma, and taken up residence in the Temple complex where she spent her days and nights praying and fasting. It was the work God had for her to do. Her life did have a holy meaning and purpose. When she saw Jesus, like Simeon, the Spirit spoke through her, and Anna began praising God and proclaiming to all in her hearing who were anticipating the redemption of Israel that the time had come, the Messiah was here in their midst, and the world was being transformed. Anna's proclamation of salvation is given the last word in the narrative, of the birth of Jesus. Leaving the Temple, Mary and Joseph, with Jesus returned, Luke tells us, to their home in Nazareth in Galilee where Jesus grew in wisdom and stature.

The Spirit moved the prophets Simeon and Anna. The Spirit moves among us still, when God's time comes and we are invited to open ourselves to the Spirit's transformative power. I believe the Spirit moved Feroza Sayed. Feroza was approaching the drive through window at an Atlanta fast food restaurant recently when she saw the driver in front of her explode in rage and throw a full soft drink into the face of the worker at the window. When Feroza reached the window she expressed her shock and anger to the worker. The worker's name was Bryanna, and through her tears she told Feroza that she was a single mother struggling to make ends meet. Bryanna is also one of the millions of front line, essential workers in our country who expose themselves daily to the COVID-19 virus so that the rest of us can have the essentials of life. Feroza gave Bryanna a \$20 tip and tried her best to comfort her. Later that day Feroza posted a description of the incident on her Facebook page. In response, many who read her post made contributions and Feroza was able to present \$1700 to Bryanna to help meet her expenses. When asked why she had felt moved to get involved, Feroza said, "I saw someone mistreated and I didn't like what I saw."

That reminds me of what the late civil rights leader John Lewis said about injustice, "When you see something, do something." Feroza, I believe, was moved by the Spirit of God. She said she hoped that what she did would inspire others to do the right thing. We live in a time too dominated by the hate-filled rhetoric of leaders in positions of power, words that too often foster hate-filled actions. All it takes, Feroza said, is for one person, to change the narrative. When Bryanna received the gift from Feroza, she said simply, through her tears, "You are a blessing."

Sometimes the Spirit works through those who are old, like Simeon and Anna; sometimes through people like Feroza Sayed; and also through the very young. When my son, Matt, was two, he was given the role of a wise man in our family Christmas Eve dramatization of the Christmas story. He was to come to bring the gift of myrrh to the

Christ child, saying, “I bring you myrrh.” When his time came, I believe God’s Spirit, spoke through the two-year-old wise man. Instead of “I bring myrrh,” he said, with his pacifier in his mouth, “I bring me.” “I bring me.” Isn’t that how God wants us to respond to the birth of the Christ child, not just to bring material offerings, but to offer ourselves to Christ, for if we do the Spirit will transform us and speak through our words and our actions.

Two elements, then, in an often neglected portion of the Christmas story. The importance of maintaining tradition. Just as Mary and Joseph as faithful Jews, when the right time came, followed the traditions and rituals of the Law of Moses, when Jesus was born, so should we continue each and every year to observe the traditions of our faith. For me, and I’m guessing for you as well, the traditions and rituals of the Christmas season, never cease filling me with awe, wonder, and hope, no matter how many times I experience them, no matter how dark the days in which we live.

However, there is more than the observance of tradition in our text. When God’s time came the Spirit was at work in two prophets, one a man and one a woman, both in their latter years. Because they opened their hearts and souls to the power of the Holy Spirit, God spoke through them, revealing to Mary and Joseph, and others in the Temple that day, and through the Gospel of Luke’s telling to us all, the true significance of this child, not only for the salvation of Israel, but also for the redemption of all. If we too open our hearts and minds and souls to the power of the Holy Spirit, that message of universal salvation will come anew to us in unexpected ways, as it did through a five-year old angel, who was insistent that we pay attention to what God was doing; through a two-year old wise man, who showed us how to respond to Christ’s coming by giving ourselves to him; and through people like Feroza Sayed, who, as she was going about her everyday activities, saw an injustice and acted to right it.

If we open ourselves, if we give ourselves, we will see and seize the opportunities presented to us to become the blessings for others God calls us to be. Let us pray.

Prayer of Dedication

Gracious Lord, we cherish the yearly observance of the traditions in our celebration of the birth of your son, the Lord and Savior of all, Jesus Christ. Empower us as well, by your Holy Spirit to take the message of salvation for all into our lives and into our world. From you come all good gifts, O Lord. Especially do we praise you for the gift of your son. As his disciples here gathered we dedicate ourselves, our time, our talents, and our resources, in his service throughout the new year ahead. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Benediction (Numbers 6: 24-26)

And now, as we continue to celebrate the coming into our world of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; and throughout the new year, may the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. Amen and amen.