

“Revelation & Redemption”

Luke 2:21-40 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – December 26, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might open our hearts to all you are doing in our world as we welcome the Christ Child. In Jesus' name, Amen.

I wonder if you would agree that it's a bit odd to use a scripture lesson that starts off “after eight days had passed” when Christmas was only yesterday. We waited so long for this moment, why rush ahead? If you can believe it, I was actually slowing things down by using this section of chapter two. The lectionary scripture suggested for today wanted us to jump ahead to verses 41-51, where Jesus is already 12 years old! I just wasn't ready, so we compromised with this earlier portion of chapter two.

But really, all I ever want to do on the first Sunday after Christmas is ruminate on chapter 2, verse 19, where we read “But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” I think we can do that today, assuming that Mary continued to do this, as more and more people shared words with her about this baby she had brought into the world and what his presence with us would mean.

The entire birth narrative in the gospel of Luke is a sort of orientation. The author is telling the story in such a way that we're not just hearing about what happened, but we're also being introduced to major themes of Jesus' ministry and the significance of his life and death and resurrection. Let's look at a few of them.

First of all, the beginning of Luke make two things very clear: Jesus' birth is happening squarely within Jewish tradition. It is the Hebrew scriptures and the Jewish people's relationship with God that Mary and Zechariah are referencing when they sing the songs about what their babies' arrivals will mean for the world. The passages we read today are very careful to tell us how faithfully Mary and Joseph follow "the law of the Lord" regarding their new baby. But there are also a lot of hints that what is coming is going to turn everything upside down, which will, in fact, actually be right-side up. We are being warned that the world is going to be changed, that while the Hebrew tradition may be the cradle from which these babies will emerge, what they're bringing with them cannot be contained by settled expectations and customary assumptions.

Another theme is closely related to this "from but beyond tradition" idea. Luke is making clear that God is doing something big in this moment, and it's important to him that we realize who God is choosing to carry out this new thing: people whom the world would otherwise overlook. An older, suspected barren woman. An unwed teenager from the boondocks of Nazareth. The shepherds who were working the night shift. Luke is warning us that this is how it's going to go; Jesus is going to be hanging out with disreputable people the whole time he's here. Tax collectors, women of ill repute, lepers – this is who God is choosing to partner with to manifest redemption. The pattern began even before Jesus was born and it still hasn't let up.

The passage we read today sets up another pattern that holds all throughout Luke's gospel. We meet Simeon, and then we meet Anna. All through Luke, when Jesus encounters people, to heal, to teach, to liberate and restore, there are two stories, one right after another, one with a man and one with a woman. Given how obvious this pattern is, it's astonishing how often throughout its history the church has forgotten that women hold up half the sky. Luke is very clear that Jesus is an equal opportunity Savior.

And finally, this openness extends far beyond the strictures of sexuality and gender. As Simeon puts it, Jesus has arrived not just as the "redemption of Israel" that Anna was waiting for, but also to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles." This is, of course, harkening back to the first theme. Jesus' birth is not just a Jewish event, but a global event, a cosmic event even. Let us give thanks and rejoice, for this is how it is that we are here today, to celebrate Christmas, because Jesus was "a light for revelation to the Gentiles."

So what do we do with these themes, these revelations, as we sit here the day after Christmas? God knows that we've been waiting for redemption. Far longer than the four weeks of Advent, we've been waiting for redemption, for restoration, for healing and hope to manifest in our lives and our world. What can Anna and Simeon and their steadfastness teach us about the present moment? Christmas is here! Isn't the waiting supposed to be over? Why does redemption seem to tarry? How do we hold onto hope when we've lost all sense of just how long we may have

to wait for our world to be set right again? Waiting for something with a set arrival time – even if it’s vague – is one thing; but unlike a year ago, we’ve now come to realize we have no idea when something we can agree to call “normality” may finally emerge.

So what can we learn from Simeon and Anna and their spiritual practice of faithful waiting? Luke doesn’t tell us how old Simeon is, but it is implied that he’s old enough you might have expected him to be dead already. He’s only still living because God promised him he’d see the Messiah before he goes. And Anna is 84. Now I know that to some of you 84 doesn’t sound all that old. But Luke makes clear that it’s not just that she’s 84, but that she’s of a “great age” because for most of her life she’s been a widow. Only seven years with her husband, and then the rest on her own, in a society that didn’t have much of a support structure for such women.

And finally, they get to meet this baby! This baby for whom they’ve been waiting for years. For years and years and years, so many years. But here’s what I’m curious about. They were waiting for the Messiah. They got a baby. They knew who the baby was, by the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. But they hadn’t yet seen the Baby become the Messiah. The full promise would take many more years to be fulfilled. Is that what Christmas is like for us this year? The birth of a promise, asking us to keep holding on, as God’s work unfolds in real time, that is, over the coming years and decades? Scripture wants to jump ahead, to a twelve-year-old in the temple and then a thirty-year-old at the River Jordan. But that’s not where we are today.

We keep waiting for redemption to be revealed, and it is being revealed, but not in a day. Not in four weeks, or nine months, or even two years. What we need to realize is that God's redemption is unfolding all around us. In every opportunity we have to bring in those living on the margins, the unwed mothers, the elderly, the farm workers, God is working out redemption. In every chance we take to promote equity across lines of sexuality, gender, race, religion, and status, God's redemption is being revealed. In every moment we live out our faith, giving respect to the Jewish tradition from which it springs while simultaneously welcoming those of other traditions as gently and warmly as Jesus did.

In these divisive times, when our very health has become a political football and our shared understanding of how to promote the common welfare has crumbled, we need to be part of God's revelation in the world of a Savior who breaks down barriers with love and humility. We need to share the Christmas good news so that everyone can know that generosity and courage are what lead to security, not violence and power. We have been waiting. We are still waiting. But we are also here, in the middle of Christmas, with Christ present in our midst! We are here, in the middle of God's revelation of redemption, being invited to carry that light into all the world. Let us not fail to rejoice and give thanks, even as we continue to hold vigil. Hallelujah and Amen!