

Sermon – “A Light for Revelation and Glory”
Sunday, December 31, 2017
Scripture Readings: Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Luke 2:20-40
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Our first reading brings words of rejoicing and praise, from the prophet Isaiah. Listen to God’s word to you from Isaiah 61:10-62:3.

61:10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for [God] has clothed me with the garments of salvation, [God] has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

62:1 For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.

2 The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will give.

3 You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

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Our Gospel reading today comes from the book of Luke, chapter 2, verses 20-40. This passage is what immediately follows the birth story of Christ in Luke’s Gospel. Listen for the Word of God.

20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

21 After 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.

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”),²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

25 Now 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. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Guided 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, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then 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 ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶ There 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, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At 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.

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

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A lot of stories crossed paths in the Jerusalem temple on the day that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus there to present him to the Lord.

First of all, perhaps we should make sense of the story we just heard as it was described. On Christmas Eve we heard Luke’s account of the story of the birth of the baby who was laid in a manger, and the visits of the angels to the shepherds and then the shepherds to the Holy Family. As you have heard today, the very next things that Luke tells us about are that family fulfilling three Jewish laws around birth.

The practice of circumcising male children at eight days was not just tradition; it was extremely ancient law for all those descended from Abraham. It was the initiation and starting point for membership of any male in the body of Israelite people, and had been since before they were even called Israelites, for it was a mark of the people of the covenant God made with Abraham, the grandfather of the man Jacob who came to be called Israel.¹

The second law was for females. From the time of Moses, women after giving birth had been required to perform a ritual of sacrifice at the temple a certain period of time afterward. It was expected that she bring to the priest a dual offering, consisting of a lamb and a turtledove or pigeon; or, if she could not afford a sheep, then two turtledoves or pigeons.² If you noticed during the reading, Luke, interestingly, tells us specifically that Mary and Joseph, in accordance with the law, brought a pair of birds, which tells us in turn that they were too poor to afford a sheep, reiterating once more the low origin of this child, who already had been put in a manger thanks to their inability to secure proper lodging.

¹ See Genesis 17.

² See Leviticus 12.

The third law was particular to firstborn sons. This one, too, dated back to the time of Moses, and recalled God’s deliverance of the Israelite people from slavery in the land of Egypt. At the time of the original Passover, when the angel of death struck down all of the firstborn sons in Egypt, both human and animal, but passed over those of the house of Israel, God gave them a law that all firstborn males, both human and animal, belonged to the Lord. Most firstborn male animals were given to God by means of animal sacrifice, but human male children, who would otherwise be devoted to the service of God for life, were to be redeemed, ransomed back to their own families, after a fashion, for a sum of money.³

All three of these laws were fulfilled in our reading today. Now when we read scripture, one thing we should keep an eye out for is why something is there. Those who passed on the Gospel stories did not tell of every moment and detail of Jesus’s life. That would have been impossible. They had to decide which details contained something that needed to be known. So we do not have a record of every breath Jesus took, but we do have a record of him breathing his last. We do not have the particulars of every meal he ate, but we do know of his sharing loaves and fish with a crowd of thousands, and bread and wine with his disciples.

And here, immediately following his birth narrative, with no other commentary, Luke takes time to inform his readers that Mary and Joseph took Jesus and followed carefully the ancient Jewish laws from God surrounding the birth of a firstborn son. It apparently is important for us to know that Jesus was circumcised, that his mother presented her offerings at the temple, and that he, too, was presented there as a firstborn male child, all according to the law.

So the first story whose path we see winding through today’s reading is the story of the law of God as revealed to the people of Israel. This child Jesus, who will carry forward the story of salvation, is standing upon the ancient story of God’s covenants with the chosen people. God’s will has been made known through the law, and Jesus is not contrary to it but living in fulfillment of it.

The personal stories found here are perhaps a little more relatable. Simeon, the devout man whose hope was to see Israel saved, this old man who saw the infant and joyfully took him up in his arms, giving praise to God—and giving amazement to Joseph and Mary—in his recognition of the powerful thing God was doing through the child, satisfied having not even seen that salvation brought about in its fullness, just in getting to lay eyes on the one who would bring it.

“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.”⁴

If we were to compare this to a fan of Chicago’s North Side baseball team declaring, a little over a year ago, that he could die in peace after finally seeing the first pitch of a World Series game with the Cubs in it, would that be sacrilegious?

³ This law is given in Exodus 13:11-16, and flows out of the Passover story in Exodus 12-13, which describes the final plague striking Egypt (and passing over Israel) at the time the Israelites are set free from their slavery there.

⁴ Luke 2:29-32 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

Yes, I'm quite sure it would be, so we won't speak of such things.

But you surely recognize the joy and delight, the long-awaited blessing.

Simeon has his own, prophetic blessing to give, too, but we'll get to that.

There is another prophetic story here, too. If we and the temple onlookers were inclined, maybe, to consider one person a crank who is declaring an otherwise non-noteworthy baby to be the savior of them all, here was a second person of many devoted years, Anna, described as a prophet, also praising God and lifting up this child, here to *be redeemed* under Jewish law, as redeemer of all the Jewish people.

The story of Jesus was just getting started here, but its whole future path is set out for us in the words of these prophets.

The story of Mary and Joseph on their way through this moment in the temple was an interesting one, for they show better than most the strange mixture of Godly and everyday life. Here they were, apparently from ordinary backgrounds, astonished at angelic prophecy about a virgin birth,⁵ then proceeding thanks to bureaucratic requirements to get caught up in logistical headaches and a travel nightmare added to by a sudden medical situation⁶...into which appeared a bunch of sheep herders saying a whole heavens full of angelic host had appeared and sent them to meet their new baby.⁷

Then...parenting, for a month or so. Sleeplessness, I imagine, hard work, and attempts to get rest any time it was possible. When it was time, another trip, over to Jerusalem, where they went simply to fulfill the law just as every other set of observant Jewish parents might have done...yet there encountering more strangers who make wild declarations about their child. "And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him,"⁸ the text tells us. Simeon even gave them their own personal blessing, declaring that people would fall and rise with this child, that what was hidden would be revealed, and mysteriously warned Mary that "a sword [would] pierce [her] own soul too."⁹

What, then? "[T]hey returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth."¹⁰ Just...back home. To regular life. "Yes, the baby looks to be the new king of heaven and earth, with prophets and supernatural choruses singing him praises, but tomorrow's still a work day. Guess we should pick up some more diapers on the way home, too." Their story is a marvel of the action of God fused with the everyday lives of human beings, which I think about every time I imagine what it would have been like to parent the Messiah, who presumably needed the snot wiped from his nose and someone to give him a daily nap.

But still more stories wind their way through this temple visit. Simeon's story was compelling and meaningful because the story he cared most about was taking place under his nose: the story of the people Israel. They were the people of the promise, and the promise was coming to fruition in this boy, whose membership among them is confirmed here, and whose role as their Messiah is proclaimed here.

⁵ See Luke 1:26-38.

⁶ See Luke 2:1-7.

⁷ See Luke 2:8-20.

⁸ Luke 2:33 (NRSV).

⁹ Luke 2:34-35.

¹⁰ Luke 2:39 (NRSV).

And not just theirs, either. For our story, too, goes through that place. The story of the people of the world. Remember the words of Simeon: “[M]y 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*.”¹¹

So the story of Mary and Joseph was interrupted, by the story of a baby, who was joined to the story of the people of Israel and, to his parents’ surprise, turned out to *be* the story of the people Israel, which, to the surprise of many, turned out to be the story of God in the story of *all* the people.

The law and the prophets together, pointing to this one child. The lives of humans and angels, intersecting in this one child. The eons of history, the great temple, and the everyday existence of an everyday couple, meeting here, presenting Jesus to the Lord, and through the voices of angels and prophets, the Lord presenting Jesus to us, the world, as a light, for revelation, and for glory. Amen.

¹¹ Luke 2:30-32 (NRSV) [emphases mine].