



## Simeon & Anna

Luke 2:22-40

Rev. Dr. Ritva H. Williams

December 28, 2014

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Christmas

We gathered here four days ago to celebrate the birth of Christ. We looked back to his birth in ancient Bethlehem even as we opened our hearts for the Christ-child to be born anew within each of us. It is still Christmas here in the church and in our homes — at least for those of us who keep the 12 days of Christmas. The commercial culture in which we live jumped into the “After Christmas Sales” mode early on the morning of December 26th - Kohl’s on-line shop was open at midnight, JC Penney was open for business at 6:00 a.m.; Amazon started its post-Christmas sales already on Christmas Eve. How do we savor the sights, sounds and flavors of Christmas in a post-Christmas world? Christmas has come and gone, so what now? What difference does it make?

Our text for this first Sunday of Christmas takes us back to the world of Jesus — back to the post-Christmas world of Jesus. Luke’s narrative touches down very briefly on the eighth day after the birth of the babe of Bethlehem to tell us that he was circumcised and named Jesus. Then the story jumps ahead six weeks, combining in one event two different rituals of ancient Judean life: the mother’s postpartum purification and the redemption of the first born son. Here for the first time members of the public meet the Christ-child. Perhaps there is something here in Luke’s narrative that might help us keep Christmas — or at least live out of the spirit of Christmas — in a post-Christmas world.

Luke’s story shows us that Jesus was born into a devout Judean family that was intentional in its observance of rituals that gave meaning to Jewish life then and now. Joseph demonstrates his commitment to parent Mary’s son by having him circumcised and given the name that was revealed by the angel before he was born. In Jewish tradition, then and now, a child’s name is considered prophetic. The name given to this child first by the angel and then by his earthly father — Jesus — means something like “God will save,” “Savior,” “the salvation of the Lord.” The baby in the manger will grow into his name.

Traditionally the postpartum purification ritual was only for new mothers, but Luke includes the whole family. It is “**their** purification.” As those of us who have had children know, childbirth is hard work – in the ancient world it was risky and dangerous work. Afterwards the mother needs some time to recover physically and emotionally. Everyone involved – mother, father and baby –

need time to get to know each other, to adjust to each other's needs, to come to terms with the new normal. The purification ritual was a way to signal that the whole family was ready to get on with its new life together.<sup>1</sup> The sacrificial offering that accompanied this ritual was a kind of thanksgiving offering for a safe delivery and start to new life.

The redemption of the firstborn male looks back to the days of Israel's slavery in Egypt, when every child born into every family legally belonged to an Egyptian slave owner. The consecration of the firstborn signaled that this particular child belonged to God in a special way (Exodus 13:2), and affirmed the family's true identity as God's people.<sup>2</sup>

Our contemporary Christian equivalent to Jesus' presentation in the Temple would be the sacrament of Holy Baptism. Both involve a symbolic giving of the child to God, an acknowledgement that this child belongs to God not just to his or her parents. We are reminded that as parents the child we are raising is not just our own but God's child. Who a child grows up to be is not totally the responsibility of his or her parents. God has a hand in raising our children.<sup>3</sup> This is why in Holy Baptism we designate sponsors — godparents — to help the parents nurture the child and help him or her to live in their baptismal covenant. This is why in Holy Baptism, the gathered people of God, promise to support and pray for the baptized in their new life in Christ.

Luke's story of Jesus' presentation in the Temple points us back to our own baptisms, reminding us that like Jesus we have been presented to, accepted and claimed by God. "Child of God" is our true identity. It is the light that shines deep within our hearts, minds and souls. As we go about our daily lives in a post-Christmas culture, how do we let that light shine? How do we nurture and nourish that light in the midst of lives that are sometimes very dark? How do we remember who we are and whose we are — a child of God — when we are hurting and grieving, when the world refuses to see God's image in us? How do we keep that light shining so that the darkness will not overcome it?

Perhaps Simeon and Anna can give us some guidance.

We're all familiar with that phrase "seeing is believing." Simeon and Anna are examples of the opposite: believing enables a person to see more than the obvious. Simeon is described as a righteous and devout man on whom the Holy Spirit rests. In other words, his awareness and openness to God's presence and guidance in his own life helps him to see where and how God is present in others. Anna is very elderly by ancient standards, a walking miracle to have survived 84 years, a woman of whose heart and mind are shaped by her residence in the Temple and her spiritual practices of fasting and prayer. Each of them comes upon a six week old baby in the arms of some very ordinary parents and he sees more than just a poor working class family with

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<sup>1</sup> Sharon H. Ringe, *Luke*, WJKP, 1995:45.

<sup>2</sup> Holly Hearon at [www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=207](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=207)

<sup>3</sup> Brian P. Stoffregen at [www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke2x22.htm](http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke2x22.htm).

a drooling, diapered infant. Each of them sees beyond the obvious, perceives the potential and promise in this unlikely child to be God's salvation — the light that will enlighten all peoples, the one who do God's work of redemption and reconciliation.

When we look around us, at the people we meet in our daily lives, do we see them as Simeon and Anna saw the baby Jesus, through the eyes of faith? Do we see the people we meet everyday at in our own homes, at work, at school, in the grocery store, in the shopping mall, on the streets as persons created in God's image, claimed by God as God's children? Do we see their potential and promise? Or do we see only their brokenness?

An old man who is dying and an aged widow are our examples for how to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in the post-Christmas world. Simeon and Anna see the world through the eyes of faith as being filled with God's presence and promise, and they spend their energy giving praise to God.

Karoline Lewis writes that in the midst of a world that often seems to be filled with evil and darkness, sickness and sorrow, "the only thing left is praise. Praise of our God whose power is known and experienced in the vulnerability of humanity. Whose love is felt in pain and loss. Whose hope knows no limits. We give praise in the face of perverse power. We give praise ... to offer resistance to ... those who would seek to instill fear instead of trust. We give praise to shout out an alternative perspective/reality/worldview that chooses love and inclusion and compassion over hatred and exclusion and heartlessness. We give praise to affirm our belief that the world can be different, has to be different ... and difference is known in bringing about the kingdom of God here and now."<sup>4</sup>

Please pray with me: Holy God, give us the eyes of faith to see your presence and promise in every person. Guide our hearts and mouths to utter words of praise that create meaning, identity and courage as we live out our callings in a post-Christmas world. We pray in your Son's holy and precious name. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Karoline Lewis at [www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3469](http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3469).