

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/31/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

First Sunday after Christmas

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, December 31st

Luke 2:22-40

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Never too old, too young, too poor, too uneducated, too weak...

Following the excitement of Christmas, the text for this First Sunday after Christmas continues where the nativity scenes stop. Now all the Christmas drama is over, this text provides the ultimate meaning of Christmas – the salvation and redemption of the world that is to come through Jesus, the incarnation of the Son of God. Two new characters are introduced in this text: Simeon and Anna. Both these characters are part of the formal religious community connected to the temple and dedicated to their roles. Both live faith-filled and expectant lives. They never ceased praying and hoping for the consolation (the coming of the Messiah) and redemption of Israel. Both of their hopes are fulfilled by the Christ child. At a time where there is more despair in the world than hope, these two characters can teach us much about faith and hope.

Luke 2:22-40 Commentary

²² And when 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 male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."

Jesus undergoes circumcision on the eighth day and is officially named as the angel instructed (v.21 – immediately prior to the lectionary text). Verses 22-24 involve two other ceremonies. There is the purification of Mary. The mother is considered under the law as unclean for 40 days following the birth of a son and 80 days after the birth of a daughter (Leviticus 12:1-8). Mary would have to bring a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtle dove for a sin offering. For those not able to afford a lamb, a pigeon or turtle dove would suffice for the burnt offering. This lesser offering was called the Offering of the Poor and is the offering which Mary brought. This is a further indication of the poverty of Mary and Joseph. The reference to "*their*" purification probably includes Joseph. There is also the presentation of Jesus. The first-born son of the mother was sacred to God. Parents had to redeem or buy back their first-born child from God at the cost of five shekels (Exodus 13:2; Numbers 18:16).

These details are provided to illustrate that from the very beginning Jesus is obedient to the Mosaic Law. It is another indication of the devotion of Mary and Joseph and thus the character of household in which Jesus was raised.

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

The Holy Spirit brought Simeon into the temple at the same time as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus for the Redemption of the First-born. The balance of the Law and Holy Spirit is evident throughout this text. Simeon immediately recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah. Simeon began with the customary blessing and then speaks what has become known as Simeon's song or the *Nunc Dimmitis* (the opening words from the Latin Vulgate: "Now thou lettest depart") – a traditional hymn of the church. Already at this early stage, the reach of Jesus' ministry beyond the Jewish people is predicted.

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

Marveled/amazement (*thaumazō*) is a common response to Jesus in Luke's Gospel. For the first time Mary is informed that this will not be plane sailing. Turning on a light inevitably creates shadows. Light can also cause blindness. Not all will see or understand the nature of God's salvation. Jesus will face opposition. Division and pain will result. There will also be times when Jesus will seem not to care about his own family. Imagine how Mary will feel. Mary will one day have to witness the torture and execution of her baby. While Mary was favored by God, such honor and favor came at a worldly cost. So too is the path of discipleship. The salvation referenced in v.30 may well be available to us gratis, but it came at great cost to this innocent young teenage mother and by what only her baby could accomplish.

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The gender pairings continue (e.g., birth announcements to Zechariah – Mary) Anna is another representative of the organized religion of the day who recognizes the child Jesus as the Messiah. Like Simeon, Anna had lived a life of faith and never gave up hope – never ceasing to pray or worship. A lesson in faith indeed. Both Simeon and Anna had some expectation of a redemption of Israel.

³⁹ And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Luke emphasizes that both the parents and Jesus had performed everything the Law required, they returned to Nazareth. There are parallels here between Jesus v.40 and John the Baptist 1:80. Regarding John, "And the child

grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel.” Luke affirms John’s greatness, but Jesus was the greater. There are also strong parallels here to Samuel: *“Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and also with man”* (1 Samuel 2:26). Indeed, there are parallels to Eli and Simeon and Mary and Hannah throughout. Both have a miraculous birth, both have lives of service and dedication, and both establish a kingdom, Samuel establishes the Kingdom of Israel under Saul and then David. Jesus is David’s descendant who establishes the Kingdom of God and will rule in eternity.

Reflection and Action

As 2024 looms, long-term trends exacerbated by the Pandemic continue to create social, economic, and political upheaval at home and around the world. This year has seen another regional war that threatens to escalate and the divisiveness at home is expected to approach levels not seen since the last Civil War as the nation enters a presidential election year. Not surprisingly, anxiety and depression are at all-time highs. Against this backdrop, the West continues to leave Christianity further behind. Where do we go from here? Is there any hope for the church?

Simeon and Anna never lost hope that God would redeem Israel – even though there were Roman soldiers occupying their nation, perhaps they could even be seen or heard from the temple complex. Their faith and patience were rewarded. God’s promises were kept in God’s time.

There are examples in our own history that should give us hope. In the wake of the American Revolution there was a moral slump. The church was in a terrible decline. Methodists were losing more members than they were gaining. Lutherans were fairsing so badly they discussed merging with the Episcopalians who were even worse off. Some churches had not taken on a new member in over a decade. The Episcopal Bishop of New York resigned and took another job because he had not confirmed anybody for so long. A poll at Harvard found there was not a single believer in the whole student body. Princeton had two. Christians at universities had to meet in secret. The Chief Justice of the United States, John Marshall, wrote to Bishop Madison of Virginia and said, “The church is too far gone ever to be redeemed.” Yet it was out of these dark times emerged the Second Great Awakening which transformed the religious landscape of the country. Out of this spiritual transformation came the whole missionary movement, the abolition of slavery, and popular education. More than 600 colleges in the middle west were founded by revivalists. Nothing is too far gone for God!

It is easier to have hope if you know the ending of the story. You know the end of the story if you believe in the beginning of the story. The universe-transforming implications of the Christmas story are clear. This is where we place our hope. Whatever comes next is merely an opportunity to live out this hope. We can certainly understand Anna’s desire to remain in the temple rather than go outside. Yet our calling is to be the hands and feet of Christ in our piece of the world today.

Simeon, Anna, Mary, and Joseph show us that God does not consider someone as too old, too young, too poor, too uneducated, or too weak. No matter where we might be in our season of life, no matter what we might be struggling with, we are not exempt. This too should give us hope, confidence, and assurance.