

Sermon: The Favor of God

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40**

We've just experienced a quick four weeks of anticipation, planning, wondering, and perplexity, and now, in Luke's story, the baby Jesus is here.

Before we dive in, did anyone hear any hints of popular songs in today's Gospel reading? Two turtledoves? A partridge in a pear tree? Five golden rings? Another hint of a song is in verse 30: mine eyes have seen your salvation, what Julia Ward Howe called the glory of the Lord in the Battle Hymn of the Republic. This is what we mean when we say the Bible has influenced our shared culture. Even if you never knew where the two turtledoves came from, you had probably heard of them.

We've also said before that the Gospels are intricate writings, filled with echoes of past prophecies and proclamations, and that Luke's work is, perhaps, the best of all the New Testament writings in its complexity. He gives us a coherent narrative that looks forward and backward, includes a variety of characters who push the story forward, and some scholars consider today's verses as almost a work of art.

In art terms, if we consider this passage as a triptych, or a three-paneled presentation, we can break it down like this:

The first panel shows Jesus in the context of a family unit observing the Law when they bring him to the Temple for *their* purification and to offer a modest sacrifice. Luke makes it clear that Jesus was born and raised in a family that lived according to the covenant, and that doing so forms and directs the life of Jesus' family.

The middle panel, and the largest, puts Jesus in a context of proclamation and prophecy, again. Israel's expectations are voiced by Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was looking forward to the salvation of Israel, which he saw fulfilled in Jesus, who is both a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of God's people, Israel. The Holy Spirit rests upon Simeon; it guides him and reveals the Messiah to him.

Through Simeon, Luke shows us that salvation comes from God, that salvation is universal for all peoples, and that salvation comes through Jesus.

The prophet Anna is also in the Temple and for Luke, she personifies Israel's piety and faith. When Jesus came to the Temple, she praised God. Praising God is part of the salvation experience; giving thanks to God makes our faith complete. Elsewhere in Luke, after Jesus healed ten lepers, one, a Samaritan, returned to thank him. In response, Jesus said, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you whole."

Anna also told those who were 'looking for the redemption of Jerusalem' about the child Jesus. Why? Because Jesus fulfilled God's promise of salvation. Anna recognized that Jesus is the one who will do this, and she felt compelled to testify to God's work. Through her, Luke shows us that the good news is not something to keep secret but should be shared.

Finally, in the third panel of our triptych, Luke again shows how, after doing everything the law required, Jesus' family headed back home where the child grew up, because that's what human children do, and by God's grace, he was filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him. Just as Mary enjoyed God's favor, for Jesus, that may indicate that he was obedient to God's will throughout his childhood.

Earlier, we mentioned the two turtledoves. The typical offering on the birth of a first-born son was a lamb, but the law allowed for alternatives based on your ability to pay. When Joseph and Mary offered two turtledoves rather than a lamb, this could indicate the economic status of a family just starting out; it doesn't mean they were living in poverty. If that were the case, they had the option to make a grain offering.

To say that Jesus' family was poor is to read too much into what Luke tells us. Luke is merely letting us know that here is a family of modest means doing what they need to do according to the Law. The point being made is that our relationship with God does not depend on our material wealth or 'earthly condition.'

After Simeon blessed Joseph and Mary, he said something interesting to Mary. He said, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel." The Gospels are literally the good news, but Jesus' birth is not good news for everyone. Some will fall because of Jesus; they know who they are and they're not happy about it.

Simeon also said that “the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” Our inner thoughts are not always positive. People will react to Jesus sharply – they will either be for him or against him throughout his ministry. Why would that be? Jesus himself will say that he causes division among people because you can’t be neutral about God. Simeon is predicting that Jesus will expose human resistance to God and God’s work, and that exposure will not be welcome.

And when Simeon said to Mary that “a sword will pierce your own soul too,” maybe he was thinking of that day in the future when Jesus would face the Cross, or maybe because Mary will soon learn that Jesus’ heavenly Father outranks her and Joseph.

The Word of God is supposed to be transformative, and if Jesus is the Word, then it should be no surprise for us to hear exactly how transformative his presence will be. Just by going to the Temple to do what all religious people did, Mary and Joseph, whether they knew it or not, had fulfilled a prophecy and caused a ripple in Temple life. People noticed this kid wherever he went – he was that special.

These days, most women give birth in a hospital, which is several steps up from what Mary experienced. Then, once you return home with the baby, what do you do?

Life returns to a new normal. Feedings, nap times, and so on become routine. We adapt to the new presence in our lives, but secretly, our children transform us.

Isaiah tells us that it takes courage to change our perspective to enable a strange new light to enter. Our ancient faith calls us again and again to freedom and a right relationship with God. We live expecting the fulfillment of God’s purposes.

And then, right about now, we begin to realize that for Jesus to transform this very world that we live in, he’ll need us to do some of the work. His ministry was all about reconciling the world to God, to bring all the lost sheep back to the fold, and to establish justice for everyone. And that would be the sticking point for the unjust. But those who give thanks to God and who speak about the child who brings redemption for everyone who wants it will find favor with God, and God knows what happens next.

Amen.

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