

Sermon: A Long-Awaited Gift

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

31 December 2017

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

Today marks the end of the calendar year, which puts us in a brief in-between time when we tend to reflect on the past and, maybe, later tonight, sing *Auld Lang Syne* as we ring in the new year. We might offer a prayer for those we've lost and for those we've found. We might also look forward to what might be in the coming months. We know it will be cold outside for a while, and we wonder if we'll get a lot of snow, but we also hope it will be a good new year, for us and for our loved ones.

In Scripture, too, we're in an in-between time. In Luke, Jesus has been born and now Mary and Joseph, as parents often do, are tying up some religious loose ends. Jesus' ministry won't begin until 3:23 when Jesus is about thirty years old. Before then, Luke shows us Jesus first as an infant and again at about twelve years old.

Right now, Mary and Joseph are fulfilling the law by presenting Jesus in the Temple. Luke tells us that that involves presenting the firstborn male to the Lord and then making a sacrifice, but he doesn't reveal everything. The Law is more complex than what he tells us here. His point seems to be only to show that, for Jesus' family, following God's law is the norm. Their sacrifice is the kind a poor family would make; they follow God not because they are wealthy and are making a show of it, but because of their devotion. This doesn't mean that the wealthy are less devoted to God, but it shows that one's financial condition is no barrier to a relationship with God, especially in a society that equates wealth as proof of God's favor toward you.

Then we get to Simeon and then to Anna, who never speaks. Luke tells us three times in three verses that the Holy Spirit rested on Simeon, that the Holy Spirit had revealed God's Messiah to him, and that the Holy Spirit guided him to the Temple on the day that Mary and Joseph presented Jesus there. Law, Spirit, and the Temple all come together to provide the context for Simeon's prophecy.

He said, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign.” Notice the order – with Jesus, we fall first and then rise, like seeds falling on fertile soil before rising to bear fruit.

Here is a divine prophecy that speaks of possible division, and the inner thoughts of many will be revealed, perhaps referring to those who are resistant to God’s work.

Next, Anna sees Jesus, recognizes him for who he is, and begins to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of an entire nation. Seeing Jesus compels Anna to testify to God’s work. This good news is shared publicly in the Temple, in the middle of Jerusalem, the spiritual center of the nation.

When they left to go home to Nazareth, the child grew and became strong, which speaks to Jesus’ humanity. And God’s grace was upon him too, meaning Jesus was obedient to God’s will from the beginning.

In Isaiah and in Luke, a child is the sign that God is at work in the world. There are a few reasons for this. One, children were at the bottom of the social hierarchy, so having a child lead them fits in well with God’s intrusive world-flipping purposes. Also, children then and now were looked upon as the innocents of the world; they hadn’t yet developed a personal agenda. They rarely wielded power nor sought it out. So, to have such a person grow up and step forward as God’s own Son, in hindsight, makes sense. And it would be completely unexpected at the time.

But while Anna, in her faith, rejoices in the presence of the baby Jesus, Simeon sees a dark side too. His faith embraces also Jesus, but he is aware of what that faith – meaning trust and reliance – means and what it may cost the faithful.

So, if all of this happened today, how might Luke present it – or how would *we* present it – in order for it to have the same impact that it had in the first century? How would we use this story of a divine birth, fulfilled prophecies, and active ministry to gather people into our faith community? A handful of devout people did this 2,000 years ago without telephones, television, rapid transit, or focus groups, and here we are today, still talking about it. Could the story of Jesus of Nazareth cut through today’s cultural noise? And what would we think of it when we heard it? In our 24-hour news cycle, would it leave a lasting impression?

My friend Jetro da Silva, a musician, author, and theologian, asks, ‘People say they want God in their life and in their communities. Here is my question: Which God do they want? The one who loves humanity and teaches us to love one another or the god who supports one’s desire (or goal) to dominate, divide, and manipulate humanity?’

Good question. How do we respond to the reality of this one little baby? Through Jesus, God has acted in such a way that we must choose to either be *for* or *against* God and God’s salvation. Mary herself has come to believe in salvation through Jesus. We can’t be neutral. Sitting here in this room this morning, we all take it for granted that we’re for God and God’s purposes, but when we leave this place and look at the world around us, we know that that ain’t necessarily so for everyone.

Everything is changed and changing with Jesus in the world. Luke’s story today blends the old reality under the Law with the new, led by the Holy Spirit. Mary and Joseph are both purified, when in the past, purification would only have been for Mary for having given birth.

And then Mary and Joseph take Jesus home. Simeon and Anna have shared their anticipation and joy for the future, and then everyone returns to their regular lives with new expectations and confidence that we can now live into fulfilling God’s purposes. Imagine a world that acknowledges the promise and value of every child. Imagine that the greatest two commandments take root in everyone’s hearts. We can make it real; we can make it happen. We have it in us to fulfill prophecies too.

Amen.