

**Sermon: A Light for Revelation**

New North Church, Hingham

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

There once was a television show called *Seinfeld* which has been off the air now for twenty-five years, but it ran for 180 episodes. It was often called ‘a show about nothing.’ We only bring that up because today’s Gospel reading seems to be in that same category. It’s kind of about nothing. Jesus, only an infant, tells no parable; in fact, no one in his family even speaks. And there’s no apparent good news.

It's just a story about two parents doing what is required by the law of the LORD.

Luke began his Gospel by saying the following:

‘Since many have undertaken to set down *an orderly account* of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account *for you*, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.’ (1:1-4)

So, this account will most certainly be written from Luke’s point of view, and one of his concerns is continuity, specifically the continuity between Judaism and Christianity; the synagogue and the church; and between Jewish and Christian writings, more so than any other New Testament writer. It’s no surprise that Luke’s Gospel begins and ends in the Temple.

Luke makes the point that here we have a family that observes the law of Moses – Torah law. This will benefit Jesus down the road when he challenges the flawed and empty practices of his opponents, because he will know what he’s talking about.

Jesus’ parents offered a sacrifice as the price for Mary’s purification following childbirth. Ordinarily, the price would have been a lamb and a dove (Lev 12:6-8), but they also just paid five shekels to dedicate Jesus to the LORD (Num 18:15-16), so using turtledoves could have been a practical economic decision rather than a sign of poverty.

Luke frames the presentation story around two prophets, Simeon and Anna, who are never heard from either before or after this passage, but their roles are crucial.

Simeon has been waiting a long time for the promise of Israel's restoration to come about, and on this particular day, the Holy Spirit guided him to the Temple. When he saw Jesus, he thanked God and made a divinely inspired speech declaring Jesus as the means of salvation for *all* people.

Simeon then blessed the child's father and mother – notice that Joseph is never named here, neither does he have anything to say – but to Mary, Simeon made a heart-breaking prediction: Israel's consolation and the Gentile's salvation will come at a great cost: the parent will bury the child.

Likewise, Anna showed great timing when she came to the Temple that day, and she too praised God for this child who will redeem Jerusalem, and she spread the word.

Anna and Simeon represent the Israel that accepted Jesus. Those who rejected him did so because they did not recognize him in their long wait for the Messiah.

We live in a world where people will go to war against other people simply because of who they are or where they live. People of faith stand in opposition to such aggression because it is against both God's Law and human law. That's my personal observation and it has little to do with today's story about nothing.

These days, we still follow the practices of our faith traditions, for example, when we baptize babies. We may no longer sacrifice lambs or turtledoves, but we support our religious institutions in other ways.

The story Luke tells us begins and ends as a story about people fulfilling their religious obligations, and they did things which are recognizable to us today simply because those who came before us set down an orderly account of what they saw and then they passed it along. Luke in particular wanted us to know the truth.

The middle of the story that Luke framed with the presentation story is a deep revelation of faith. Simeon and Anna both waited a long time for this, but, having been promised by the Holy Spirit that restoration would happen in their lifetimes, they patiently waited in faith for that day to arrive. And when it did, they were there.

The modern world is not built for that anymore, sadly. We think, well, it's already been done so there's nothing worth waiting for; let's go to the mall.

The first point in today's reading is that Jesus was a Jew and his parents raised him according to the law of the LORD. He was a historical person living in the midst of religious, social, and political conflicts in Galilee and Judea. And the favor of God was most logically upon him because of their unique relationship.

The Jews and Gentiles in Luke's audience may have had difficulty building an integrated faith community. Many Jews rejected the early Christ followers precisely because they were open to Gentiles; they also worried about losing their Jewish identity.

Gentile Christians must have felt good about being included in God's salvation; their inclusion did not mean a break with Judaism, rather, it fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that YHWH's expectations for Israel would be fulfilled; things are looking up.

The second point Luke makes is that things take time. When we open ourselves up to be guided by the Holy Spirit or divine inspiration or whatever you want to call it, our eyes will see salvation.

Some people today presume that the young family portrayed in Luke's Gospel – Jesus, Mary, and Joseph by name – lived in poverty, and that presumption is based on the fact that their sacrifice of two turtledoves was the option available for those who could not afford a lamb and a dove, missing the fact that that would have been the case for most people at the time. It doesn't mean that they lived in poverty in the way we understand it today.

People also believe that Mary did not need purification, as she happened to be Mary the Mother of God. But she was a woman living in first-century Israel and had just birthed a baby boy. Customs and Scripture obligated her to fulfill what was stated in the law of the LORD. That law also directed Mary and Joseph to circumcise their son, which they did, in verse 21.

We mention all of this not to criticize others, but to point out that we too follow Scripture and the customs of our faith traditions. These days, it takes imagination to ask where our ancient faith is leading us now. One thing faith tells us is that God came down in human form to nurture the love and peace that some people waited their entire lives to find, a love and peace which the Holy Spirit is always ready to guide us to.

Amen.

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