

First Sunday after Christmas, December 31, 2017

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More than Meets the Eye

Luke 2:22-40

THE INTRODUCTION

Luke's version of the birth of Jesus includes information not shared in Matthew's version. Luke tells us that at eight days old, like other male children, Jesus was circumcised and given the name "Jesus," following the earlier directive of the angel. Luke then tells us that when he was about four to six months old the family made a trip to the Temple in Jerusalem in order to carry out the dual religious requirements of: 1) purifying Mary, the mother, after childbirth, and 2) redeeming or dedicating Jesus to God as her first born.

Both of these rituals were important to Luke in conveying the Good News to his readers, because they indicate that Jesus was raised in a family that followed the Law and Jewish traditions, but more than this, Luke wants to get across that the Holy Spirit is still active in the course of Jesus' everyday life. The gospel was unfolding. He shows this by letting us hear from Simeon and Anna, who perceive by the Holy Spirit the significance of this baby and speak out about him in the midst of the community of faith gathered there in the Temple.

THE READING

22 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 firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon;* this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.* ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon* came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon* took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant* in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

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

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon* blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

36 There was also a prophet, Anna* the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child* to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

SERMON

When I was in elementary school, I enjoyed going to the dentist, *not* for the procedures, mind you, but to read the *Highlights* magazine in the waiting room! It was a publication especially designed for kids my age. I would open it and go directly to the activity sheet on finding hidden objects. This sheet was usually an intricate, black-and-white drawing of a room of some kind in which there were other objects one wouldn't notice at first: maybe a cat that blended into the rug, or a phone behind a chair, that sort of thing. Once I was into the hunt, I didn't want to put it down!

During one of my interviews with TriCon, I was given a tour of this building. When I entered the sanctuary here, the first thing I noticed was how bright white it is and how high the ceiling. Next I observed how tall and wide the pulpit is and how small the communion table in comparison. It was only in a third look that I took in the red carpet and the window shutters. It was much later that I learned of the secret stairway behind one of the narthex doors! **In religious spaces and religious stories there's always more than meets the eye.**

The first thing about Luke's story that we probably register, since you and I have never seen the Jerusalem Temple of Jesus' day – the one that Herod the Great remodeled – is that this family kept the rituals of their religion. They did that which was required by Jewish Law: presented Jesus to God as their firstborn and presented Mary, to be ritually cleansed after childbirth.

The Temple Mound was a huge complex of buildings and courtyards. Males could go into most all spaces, priests entered the Temple proper and only the High Priest the Holy of Holies. On this occasion, Jesus' parents would have gone as far in as the Court of the Women, a space that would have been crowded with *all* kinds of people. Seeing their animal offerings, a priest would

have come to them, asked their situation, made sure that they were doing things correctly, taken their offering, sacrificed the animals, kept a portion of the meat, and returned later with the roasted portions that *the family* was to consume.

What should be obvious to us looking at Luke’s picture, is that Joseph and Mary were good Jews who followed the rules of their faith. By this, Luke gets across to his readers that Jesus was ‘raised right’ – an “insider” and not a rabble-rouser. This family revered the Lord and the Temple as a religious institution.¹

These days, of course, “institutions” in general are viewed less favorably than in other times. Indeed, some people view the church as *merely* an institution with rules and regulations intended to keep superstitious people in line. Others may attend church just once or twice a year, or give a nominal offering, in hopes of maintaining a bare minimum connection. When we do this, we risk treating the church as a *vendor* of religious goods and services. But even those of us that regularly attend church may do so simply as a duty or obligation. **In the case of Jesus’ family, however, there was more going on than meets the eye.**

There are others around Mary, Joseph, and Jesus in the Temple. These others may have come to the Temple for their own personal needs, but seeing a baby, they would have congregated to “ooh” and “ahh” and to witness this sacred ritual, as we do for a baptism. So if this scene were a *Highlights* drawing, and you and I were to hunt around within it, we would be able to make out Jews from other lands, Gentile seekers, the elderly, children, and females – the people that tend to be *invisible* in our society – because Luke takes care to point them out to us. Moreover, the gathering would have included *all* ages, mixing together, unlike the trend in our society to segregate by age, because **the Temple that gathered around the baby Jesus was an intergenerational community of faith.**

Scholar, Avery Dulles, wrote a typology called *Models of the Church*. Among the six he names, one is church as “institution;” another is church as a “community of disciples.”² After my initial tour of TriCon – probably at a Sunday service when *this* sanctuary filled with people of all types and ages – that I was enabled to perceive it as the intergenerational community of faith that *it is*.

There is still more to be discovered in the picture of the Temple in this story. Luke names and describes two of the aged sages that gathered about this young family: Simeon and Anna. In church jargon, we’d call them “pillars” of the church. They were the members who are always present, ready to assist, devout: practicing prayer, studying the scriptures, and worshipping God. They would have also taken it upon themselves to genuinely welcome newcomers like Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, to teach in the Church School, and work with the youth, even though they had already done their stint with their own kids. More than this, Luke describes Anna and Simeon as vibrant adults, still learning and growing in *their* faith. Respected for their insight and wisdom, when *they* spoke, others listened! Why? Because as Luke indicates, they were full of the Holy Spirit.

¹Fred B. Craddock, *Luke* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990) 38.

²Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 2002). The six models are: Institution, Mystical Communion, Sacrament, Herald, Servant, and Community of Disciples.

So on our ‘activity sheet’ picture, we should also locate the Holy Spirit. It was by the whisper of God’s Spirit that Simeon and Anna were able to see the potential of this little boy, Jesus. There was more to him than met the eye! As nurturing members of the faith community, they shared their intuitions about his identity and role as God’s Anointed for the world. The text records that Joseph and Mary were incredulous hearing this; “This, our baby, who poops, and cries, and keeps us up at night?!” Simeon and Anna had just put *more* to ponder on Mary!³

The blessings that these seniors pronounced contained cautious realism too. Just as others give *us* warnings as new parents about bullying, drugs, pollution, and discrimination, they underlined that Jesus would not be received as God’s gift by all; there would be suffering to endure. **Here’s the thing: it takes *more* than a parent or a grandparent or the School or the State to raise a child, any child, into its God-given potential; it takes a faith village!** And when that community of faith is open to and full of the Holy Spirit, its members will have a deep well from which together to draw the mutual support that they will all need.

In my working relationship with you at TriCon, it took just a little longer to perceive how the Holy Spirit is moving to shape your faith – young, middle, and old members alike. I think for me it first came to light when adults from the Lenten small groups talked about forgiveness, and then when the youth spoke after the Mission Trip. I could see how the Holy Spirit was nourishing you.

“To be a nurturing community of faith” is the first half of the proposed Vision Statement for TriCon. It seems spot-on as an aspiration to me, because it is for certain sure that God calls you to become *even more* of what already meets the eye!

³Recall how in the birth story Luke notes Mary’s propensity to “ponder” all that’s going on. Luke 2:19.