

The First Sunday after Christmas B

(Jan. 1, 2012) Luke 2:22-40

The Song of Simeon

This Sunday church life begins to get back to normal, after the drama of Advent and the climax of Christmas Eve. It is a typically “low” Sunday, following a high holy day. There is also a dip in the extraordinary intensity of the narrative drama, from the magnificent praise of the heavenly host singing Glorias at the birth of Messiah, to the ordinary and mundane of “normal life.” Of course the gospels tell us precious little about Jesus between his birth and baptism. We know that he was circumcised at the end of eight days; that he was presented at the Jerusalem temple when the time came for purification; and that he went there again with his parents when he was twelve years old. The rest of his boyhood is a blank. We are left with two huge gaps in Jesus’ life, between infancy and twelve and between twelve and thirty. All of this represents a kind of letdown from the high drama and considerable detail in Matthew and Luke that peak at Christmas.

Today’s lesson tells us that Jesus was recognized by Simeon and Anna when he was presented at the temple. Simeon and Anna were two oldtimers who pretty much lived at the temple. Simeon’s song is often heard at funerals:

Now let your servant go in peace; your word has been fulfilled:

my own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared

in the sight of every people:

a light to reveal you to the nations and glory of your people Israel.

Old Simeon is saying, "Now I have seen it all." He seems to know who little Jesus is and what God has in store for him. It is a bit odd that we only use these words of recognition and dedication for a child at times of death. Perhaps they have more to say to us on this post Christmas letdown/low Sunday.

Today is the eighth day of the twelve days of Christmas, but our commercial-consumer culture thinks it is all over, and has been for a week now. Nothing beats the inflated expectancy, excitement and anticipation before Christmas, and few things match the deflation to follow. Now 'tis the season of crumpled paper, falling needles, overstuffed bellies and trashcans, and serious consideration of possible plans to maybe start to think about beginning to explore some New Year's resolutions... such as to eat and drink less and to exercise more, or to be more kind or less sharp-tongued.

Though we might sing another carol or two in church, the world has shifted its thinking from the coming of Christ to the coming of the next

credit card bill. The world goes back to work a day or two after Christmas day and marks the end of it all. We return the duplicate gifts and ill-fitting sweaters that blink and play “Rudolf” when we lift our arms. We go back to the store for more batteries. We take our gift cards to the big post season clearance sales. We put away our trumpets and fanfares and start to roll up the twinkling lights. We go from the extraordinary to the ordinary, from the grand intrusion and holy interruption to the predictable routines. We go from the blessed incarnation of God the Word made flesh to the familiar, as comfortable as old shoes.

But we don't want to forget Christmas entirely. Henry Van Dyke once asked, “Are you willing to forget what you have done for others and to remember what others have done for you... to stoop down and consider the needs of little children... If so, then you can keep Christmas, and if you can keep it for a day, why not always?” If we can be peaceful, loving and generous for a day, why not keep Christmas for the other 364 days of the year? You know why. Nobody can live like that. Part of the fun of Christmas is that it takes us out of the ordinary, the routine, the expected. If you made every day Christmas, it wouldn't be Christmas. Holidays, the concept and the word coming from the words “holy days” are special because they are different, set aside to be observed in ways every single day cannot.

You can't stay on the mountaintop. After the second or third celebration with family members spread across three states, and the umpteenth cookie and egg nog, there is a little something in most of us that secretly longs for a return to normal, back to the ordinary, the familiar routine of everyday life. The event at the temple from today's gospel text represents this return to business as usual. Even the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph did it. They left Bethlehem in Judea, which was never really their home. They returned to Nazareth in Galilee. When the time came, they trekked to Jerusalem to present little Jesus and offer a sacrifice as the law demanded.

Lest we think that the gifts of the Magi bumped up the holy family's social status, Luke points out that Mary and Joseph offered the sacrifice of the poor: two turtledoves. The wealthy sacrificed a lamb. The heavenly hosts have moved on. There are no more echoes of their joyous songs that filled the air on that silent, holy night. It's time to do what needs to be done. Mary and Joseph have a son to raise, religious obligations to keep, and a long dusty trip back to Nazareth to make. What could be more ordinary and less inspiring than that? "We need a little Christmas, right this very minute." That song is so last week. The star over Bethlehem has moved on. The Magi have returned to Persia. Time to go back to work in that town about which one of the disciples would later say, when he first heard about Jesus, "Can anything good

come out of Nazareth?" It's like some say about my state of origins: the only thing good to come out of Iowa is Interstate 80.

Little Jesus' recognition by Simeon and Anna in the temple tells us two things: one, that this child is destined for greatness in God's campaign to change the world, making all things new; and two, that he is part of an ancient tradition. This is Luke's version of Matthew's theme that Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it in a revolutionary way. Simeon and Anna, the old man and old woman who wait in the ancient temple, cling to the ancient hopes of Israel and represent the tradition of many generations who have gone before. Old Simeon and Anna search the scriptures and pray as the faithful of Israel have done for centuries. They show us that Mary and Joseph were keeping the law of Judaism, dedicating their child, not starting a new religion. Old Simeon and Anna show that Jesus' message about the kingdom of God, revolutionary as it is, remains in synch with what has gone before. Picture the old man with the baby in his arms: it is a snapshot of the long salvation story which is a mix of old and new covenants, continuity and change, extraordinary intrusion of the holy and resumption of the ordinary.

Life is full of bright mountaintops and shaded valleys, and plenty of elevations between. The midnight visions of sugar plums dancing in our

heads alternate with oatmeal and orange juice in the morning. Warm memories of a large crowd singing carols to candlelight on Christmas Eve yield to the faithful few on an ordinary Sunday morning. Instead of the angel Gabriel and the glorias of the heavenly host, you get the same old preacher and the choir gets the morning off. But the message today is that God is with us in the ordinary times. The Incarnation celebrated at Christmas is just as real when the celebrations end. Returning home from the holidays, getting the pine needles out of the rug and dragging the tree to the curb, going back to the mill and school, coming to worship on an ordinary Sunday, fulfilling the law as Mary and Joseph once did... all these things affirm that God is with us right here and now as much as in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve.

Back at home in Nazareth, we can imagine Mary and Joseph wondering what all this means, this extraordinary interruption into ordinary life, this holy intrusion into the mundane: The long trek to Bethlehem, the startling events “away in a manger,” the shepherds with news of angel choirs singing glorias, the wisemen and their gifts, the flight to Egypt to escape the treachery of Herod. We can imagine Joseph humming a tune as he measures, cuts and planes a board; and Mary smiling to herself as she washes the baby’s diapers, the same tune ringing in her heart, a tune now lost to us. But we can imagine that it was Simeon’s song: “Lord, now thy servant go in peace, according to thy word, for my eyes

have seen thy salvation...” It was and is a song of the ages, linking the best of what has been to the brightest of what is yet to come. May it carries us into a New Year of hope and promise. Amen.