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“About the Child”

Luke 2:22-40

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Introduction:

At the very start of Luke, the Gospel writer explains that he began to compose his writings by reading all he could about Jesus and by interviewing eyewitnesses. There was a need to compile all of his teachings and stories because the eyewitnesses and the first generation of disciples were beginning to pass away. The early community of believers had expected Jesus’ return to take place soon, and when it became evident that they would have to wait a little longer, it was imperative to get it all written down. The scripture reading we are about to receive tells the story of Mary and Joseph presenting the infant Jesus at the Temple. It is the only retelling of this scene in all four gospels, so it is one that Luke must have found important to have included it at all.

Luke 2:22-40

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:

In Luke's account, it is now 40 days after Jesus' birth. After eight days, he had been circumcised and named, in accordance with Jewish law. Here, 32 days later, his parents are taking him to the Temple in order to offer a sacrifice and to consecrate their child to the Lord.

They must have been in a solemn mood that day. It is not hard to imagine these two young parents in quiet procession to the great Temple, their awe at entering its holy courts, their nervousness as they prepared the sacrifice according to the law. Mary and Joseph bring the offering designated for the poor: two turtledoves.¹ It is this child born into poverty who is the Savior. He is the sign of God's redemption.

We all know the way tiny, little infants wield a certain kind of power. I have seen calloused, old men become gentle as doves with a baby in their arms. Gruff voices shift to sweet coos and falsetto baby talk when tiny children are around. Just one pass through the grocery store with Eleanor when she was a baby, and cashiers softened, men and women alike waved and winked an eye. Most any one of us would throw ourselves in front of a moving car to save a child. Herod



lived in fear that a child would be born to fulfill prophecy and take over his kingdom, Pharaoh so feared the Hebrews' infant sons that he had an entire generation of newborns disposed of to keep the people from growing in number and strength. Babies are defenseless, but not harmless. There is something powerful about a baby.

We can picture the old man Simeon with the baby in his arms. Perhaps he is giddy with joy. Perhaps he stares at the baby with tears streaming down his face. Perhaps he is completely lost in his gaze, transfixed in wonder. This is the child for whom he has waited—not for weeks or months, but for decades. It seems strange that the first words out of his mouth would be: “Now . . . dismiss your servant in peace.” This was a Semitic way of saying, “Let me die.” Now that God has done what God has promised, the old man is complete.

Anna, a prophet in the Temple, adds her own joy and praise to the moment. She watches the whole thing unfold and then races all over town excitedly sharing the news of this child.

No sooner have Anna and Simeon sung their songs and spoken their lines, they disappear from the gospel altogether. It is strange. Tom Long writes, “It is almost as if, having seen the news reports of God’s coming salvation in Jesus, they get up, turn off the television, go to bed, and leave the rest of the story to twenty- and thirty-somethings. And they depart not because they are weary, but because they are full of hope in God’s providence—and therefore able to trust the future to God.”ⁱⁱ

Anna and Simeon have a faith that leans forward into the promises of God, even when they have no idea how those promises are going to be fulfilled.

We know something about this type of faith. We know that the children and grandchildren, nieces and nephews and young friends entrusted to our care, Lord willing, will live on beyond us. Each time we baptize a child, we are reminded that the world becomes increasingly more about them and less about us. It reorients our focus toward a future promise and reminds us of the important things in life and in faith.

I’ve told you before that I love to linger in Heritage Hall. In the faces of black and white photographs, I see men and women who planned for a future they would not themselves live to see. They pledged and planned and promised to work for the building of God’s Kingdom here on Mountain Ave. and beyond. And they leaned with faith into the future God had before them.

Who are those people in your life who saw enough of God’s future to trust the way forward? I think of a grandmother who lost her day-old baby girl and leaned on her faith to see her way through tomorrow and the next day and the next to raise two strong boys and love on four future grandchildren. I see a grandfather who filled fuel oil tanks to keep poor families warm and trusted that God would provide for his own family when those customers couldn’t pay their bill. I think of a sister-in-law who lost her family home and every worldly possession in it when a fire destroyed



their family home 15 years ago, the day before Christmas Eve. Today, they celebrate December 23rd as “To God Be the Glory Day” because even though they lost everything inside, all eight family members were safe. And I see a friend who prayerfully puts on her PPE with purpose as she begins her ten-hour shift on the COVID unit day after day at Carilion RMH, trusting there is a light at the end of this tunnel.

There is so much in this life that is uncertain—but Simeon and Anna teach us what it can look like when we lean forward by faith into the promises of God.

As we approach a new year, may we be reminded of the call to lean into the future with hope. We know not what 2021 holds for us, but we do know that God goes before us.

The trials of this life aren’t easy. The trials of this past year have not been easy. But we worship a Savior who became flesh and dwelt among us. Who chose to walk the path of humanity, to live and love and grieve and suffer and die—showing us the lengths God goes to—showing us the truth of God’s deep love.

Readers of Luke will soon discover that everything Simeon prophesied will come true. And everything Simeon and Anna hoped for will indeed be accomplished—Israel is consoled, the gentiles are given light, and a mighty savior is raised up in a blaze of Easter glory.ⁱⁱⁱ

The shepherds, the magi, Simeon, and Anna ... these folks will likely never know exactly what miracles this sweet baby boy will perform, what people he will make welcome, or what love he will ultimately give. But they know enough about God to trust and to lean forward into the future with hope.

This Christmas season, this New Year, this is my prayer for you—may you lean forward by faith into the promise of God.

ⁱ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol 1. (WJK Press, Louisville: 2008), p164.

ⁱⁱ Tom Long “Living By the Word,” *The Christian Century* (Dec 24, 2014), p20.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

