

The Persians and the Prophets

Luke 2:22-38 –

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they (Joseph & Mary) brought him (Jesus) 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”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves 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. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Guided 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, ²⁸ Simeon 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. ³⁴ Then 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 ³⁵ so 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 seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At 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.

The Word of the Lord: thanks be to God.

Let me wish you an early “Blessed Epiphany!” January 6 is Epiphany, a celebration remembering the arrival of the Magi – sometimes called the wise men – from Persia, east of Palestine. Imagine we are in the days between Luke 2:1-20 (Jesus’ birth and the angels singing to the shepherds) and today’s passage of the rituals at the temple. In Bethlehem, we’re on village time. Joseph and Mary are waiting the 40 days until the purification and dedication at the Jerusalem temple. Mary is tired after the birth. Why walk five or more days back to Nazareth and then another five days returning to near Jerusalem? Perhaps they stay with relatives in Bethlehem. Joseph may do a carpentry job or help their host or a neighbor with repairs. Mary rests up and cares for the baby.

When Joseph and Mary bring Jesus to the temple to complete the rituals required after the birth of a first-born son, two prophets, Simeon, and Anna, approach them and speak litanies of praise and truth for the present and the future. These words of fulfillment of the God’s promises in the Old Testament for a Messiah, a redeemer, are *pretty surprising* given the details in the passage. Joseph and Mary are clearly humble village peasants: there is not even a mention of giving a lamb as the sacrifice (see Leviticus 12:2-8) as a wealthier family would do. There is only

the “if the family can’t afford a lamb” option mentioned: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Simeon, guided by the Spirit’s power and wisdom, not by appearances, is seeking the “consolation of Israel” and “The Lord’s messiah.” [Consolation is a less-frequent word. It comes from the same root as the promise of the Holy Spirit in John 14:26. Can you see the meaning “with solace” - con-solation - within the English?] Holding the baby Jesus, Simeon declares the truth: that (God’s) “salvation...prepared in the sight of all nations” and the one who is to be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles” *is this little child* – born of God’s Spirit to Mary. Anna speaks of this same baby – proclaiming this as a sign of future redemption.

- Looking back at Luke 2:29-32 – the Song of Simeon – which I think the heart of the passage.
 - First, these words are sung every evening in the contemplative service of Compline by a number of Catholic communities, and weekly by some Episcopalians. It is part of the compline service on King 98.1 FM every Sunday at 9:30 p.m. from St. Mark’s Cathedral in Seattle. ***Clearly, the elders of our faith tradition considered this to be an important passage.***
 - Also, the arrival of the Messiah is first proclaimed by the angel in Luke 2:11 to the shepherds, and then here in Luke 2:26 as a promise to Simeon. And his song echoes the angel- “good news...for all the people” - The Messiah who will bring redemption is not just for the people of Israel. Twice in the passage the scope is global, crossing

cultural & ethnic boundaries : in v. 31 God's preparation is made "in the sight of all nations" and in v. 32 this salvation is "a light to the Gentiles." The word for Gentiles (here & elsewhere e.g., Acts 18:6) is "ethnon" – every race, ethnicity, tribe.

- Finally, this is no timid elderly person. ***This song is filled with energy!*** Verses 32 and 35 both contain terms related to word apocalypse. In English, this is the noun revelation, and the verb "will be revealed". This light of Christ that "suddenly" brings revelation of God's salvation to all nations, is the same light that discloses the thoughts inside the hearts of many people.

We're going to return to Simeon & Anna in a minute. Let's note first – so far, everyone (except the angels, and a couple of Roman officials given for reference) in Luke chapters 1 and 2 has been Jewish – all local people.

There was a small commotion at the temple the day of Jesus' dedication and Mary's purification, with Simeon's proclamation and Anna speaking to everyone who would listen. Weeks pass as Anna remains at the temple, likely praying and perhaps singing Simeon's words, and talking about the redemption coming soon. *Then suddenly, Magi – Persians, astrologers of some financial means, come to Jerusalem.* They ask for directions: where is the King of the Jews who has been born? King Herod had to call the teachers of the law to answer them. I'd imagine word spread quickly – even to the temple and to Simeon's neighborhood. Might Simeon, a devout man, have been one of the elders Herod called to the palace? Probably not, but he may have been friends with one of the leading priests or

teachers, or their families. Simeon would have shared about Jesus, who he believed was the Messiah, with his friends.

As we continue to imagine the Magi's time in Jerusalem, might the Magi have met Simeon, introduced by a Jewish elder or by a member of Herod's court? Might Simeon, who heard Anna's prophecies, have shared her words along with his song of blessing, praise, and truth? The Magi, hungry to increase their knowledge, may have eagerly agreed to a meal at the home of one of the elders of the Jews, who invited his friend Simeon over for dinner. EXCEPT – this invitation probably would NOT have happened – because Jews won't eat with non-Jews. Perhaps Simeon came near the palace where the Magi may have been invited for a meal with Herod, who was eager (for selfish reasons) to learn more. We really don't know - it's not recorded – *what else the Magi heard while in Jerusalem.*

Let's listen to Matthew 2:2, 5-6 and the key words from today's Gospel lesson in Luke 2 from Simeon and Anna. Here how these voices come together and build from narrow to broader:

Magi: "Where is the one who has been born **king** of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose..."

The chief priests & teachers of the law answer: "In Bethlehem in Judea....for this is what the prophet (Micah 5:2,4) has written..."for out of (Bethlehem) will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." (This refers to David – the messiah from David's line. It is Isaiah 11:1 that references "the shoot of the stump of Jesse.")

Simeon: celebrates the Spirit guiding him to see the embodiment of the Messiah-Savior – the light of the world, - not just a prophecy of the past; it's happening now, right before our eyes!

Anna: affirms Simeon' words by noticing and proclaiming the child as part of God's future redemptive work

Compared to the political & practical words of the Magi and the teachers of the law – king, ruler, shepherd - Simeon and Anna speak in spiritual terms: of revelation, of salvation, of redemption, of ransom. The word redemption in Luke 2:38 (summarizing Anna, the prophet, age 84) is related to a key word in Matthew 20:28 – where Christ will give his life to RANSOM many, a ransom paying the price to set free those who have been taken captive or are indebted.

We've imagined what may have occurred while the Magi were in Jerusalem – hearing not only the words of the prophet Micah – but potentially also the Song of Simeon & the worshipful words of Anna. Picture the Magi in Bethlehem – a small town. Everyone in town would hear about their visit. Might a shepherd, or one of those herders' relatives or neighbors, have told the story of the angelic announcement and chorus to these Magi, who came to town following a star - and seeking a child recently born? Was God providing them more than a star, more than ancient writings, by giving the prophecy and witness of living people?

What might the Spirit bring to our attention from this passage, and this imagining that the Magi may have also heard Simeon or Anna's words, or the witness of a shepherd? When and how did the Persian Magi begin to grasp this was not just an

earthly king – if they ever did understand that? Here are two musical thoughts as we continue the Christmas season and enter the new year:

- “What child is this” is a favorite carol, especially musically, for me. Verse 3, line 2 reads “The King of kings salvation brings, let loving hearts enthrone him!” What words of scripture or song that we know by heart feel right to proclaim as our witness about who Jesus is for us today to those currently outside the church family? God has blessed us with so much hope to share. Let’s pray that the Spirit guides us to offer what another person is open to hearing.
- One of the classic songs from Sesame Street is “Who are the People in Your Neighborhood?” (I think it began as early as 1971 – and a new pop version was done in 2019 for the 50th anniversary celebration.) When we think about our neighborhood and our neighbors, do we think of only those within a few blocks, or who are like us? In the coming days and months, may we pay attention to “wanderers” and “seekers” who cross our paths. May we take the time to hear and understand their queries, and with God’s truth and grace respond singing the songs of our Holy Book that express the joy, peace, and hope for all people! May God bless our cross-cultural conversations – making them an Epiphany that brings to light and declares God’s ancient-eternal faithful lovingkindness. We may initially think of international students and refugees, but I believe a significant cross-cultural gap is between those inside and those outside the institutional church. And gaps – broken places - are what the Messiah came to bridge and to heal.

Simeon's words - as do Jesus' later – expand the revelation of God's light and redemption to non-Jews, to all peoples. God promised that light would redeem those stumbling in darkness. The sign of Immanuel clearly shone beyond the local neighborhood, beyond Bethlehem, beyond Jerusalem...to Persia...to the ends of the earth. Spirit – guide us with signs we cannot miss because they shine so brightly in our hearts and in our communities! Amen.