

Incarnation and Ordinariness

Luke 2:21-40

²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

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"), 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.

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

What this passage narrates are the next events in the life of Jesus, following his birth, as told from Luke's gospel. This is probably a good time to share that I'm starting a sermon series in Luke, which will take us through Easter. We actually began in Luke on Christmas eve with the birth narratives, and are continuing it today with this account of Simeon and Anna.

This morning I'll reflect briefly on two aspects of this morning's passage. Hopefully providing some food for thought and encouragement for us this Christmas season, and for the new year.

1. From this passage, and the preceding birth narratives, we learn that Jesus entered the world, and grew up in it, like just about every child in this world (especially in *that* world at *that* time). There *were* spectacular events surrounding the announcement of his birth, but what Luke is telling us now

is that Jesus underwent all of the normal experiences of babyhood and childhood and living in a family. A 1st century Jewish family, in his case.

In our passage this morning, we go from birth to circumcision, to dedication, to their move home to Nazareth, to a comment about him growing up. Then, if we read on in Luke 2, we have an account of Jesus as a pre-adolescent 12-year-old upsetting his parents (as kids will do), by staying back in Jerusalem after the Passover while the entourage which was headed back to Nazareth had already travelled a full day on foot. Perhaps this was a bit of youthful rebellion (again, normal!), or Jesus coming to an early awareness of himself and of God's call on his life. Mary is a good mother and gives him a proper scolding about that! (also normal) "How could you do this to us?!?! We were worried sick!"

In some ways, Luke is normalizing Jesus' early life. From his birth, Mary and Joseph followed the Jewish law (circumcision and purification, as spelled out in Leviticus). From there, Jesus was steeped in the customs of his people, and grew up like other kids do. Which is perhaps why we aren't told much of anything about his childhood or young adulthood; because it was pretty normal. Nothing extraordinary.

The point of all this is, Jesus lived in history as a human being, and looked and acted like a human being, like you and me. He wasn't so supernatural, or out of the ordinary; he didn't levitate or have a glowing halo around his head or a neon sign above him that said, "Hey everybody, look! It's the son of God!" Announcements *were* made to a few people in spectacular fashion, before and shortly after his birth, and Simeon and Anna recognized him for who he was (thank you, Holy Spirit for that revelation to them), but he was, in many ways, just another baby in the temple, just another child in a family, just another adolescent stressing out his parents.

This is the meaning of incarnation—of God becoming one of us, a human being living among us, entering the world in all of its beauty and its messiness. Obviously as a child, which we celebrate this season. But as an adult too. As we read on in the gospels we see Jesus the human being, as an adult, with two feet on the ground (and once on the water; that was cool, but not normal), we see him dealing with people and their personal problems and their conflicts with each other, and dealing with his own emotions, and the pain of betrayal, and eventually death. All human experiences.

This is the good news of Christmas: Because God became a flesh and blood human being, in Jesus, God knows and relates to us in all of our humanness. Our

ordinary, everyday humanness. And, what God is telling us is that by becoming human, humanity has the right to know that it is *good to be human, and it is good to live on this earth*, because God in Jesus chose and said “yes” to this planet and this humanity by living here as one of us.

2. Simeon and Anna, likewise, were ordinary people. They did not have anything super extraordinary happen to them, like some of the others who are part of the Christmas story. No angel visitations—in person or in dreams—no miraculous pregnancies or births (like Elizabeth, in her later years, or Mary in her younger years), no being struck mute for 9 months like Zechariah, no sudden appearance of a choir of angels announcing the birth to shepherds and telling them to go to Bethlehem to check it out. No star wondrously appearing and then moving across the sky to guide people from a far-off land to offer gifts.

With the account of Simeon and Anna we go from the extraordinary part of the Christmas story, to the ordinary. The extraordinary *will* return after several years (and a couple chapters later in Luke), when Jesus is grown up. We’ll see it, mostly, when we get to his healing ministry. But even then, the majority of Jesus life and ministry was pretty ordinary. And the people Jesus met, and ministered to, were everyday folks, who lived in Edmonds, Lynnwood, Brier, Everett,

Mukilteo and Shoreline. This morning's account represents a turn from the extraordinary to the ordinary.

Now Anna and Simeon each *did* receive guidance and prompting from the Holy Spirit about the appearance of the messiah, and they each had some important things to say about Jesus in that moment, but in the Bible that isn't super extraordinary; that kind of thing happened frequently and wasn't that unusual. Simeon and Anna had dedicated themselves to prayer and watchfulness for years—decades—so this represents one moment in one day after years and years of living their everyday lives, praying and waiting, before God gave them a heads up that Jesus had arrived.

I love this, because it tells us that we don't have to have extraordinary things happen to us along the way, for us to be hopeful people and to experience the grace of God and the fulfillment of God's promises. Faithful and steady living and praying and serving is what the majority of the life of faith is about. Maybe we'll have an extraordinary experience or two along the way, but we don't *have to have* those to be a person of faith, hope, and love.

This account tells us that God needs and uses all of us, including those like Anna and Simeon, who live relatively quiet and steady lives. This makes me appreciate the Christmas story more and more, because any and every type of

person is included and plays a part. The Christmas story is the perhaps the most intergenerational and inclusive part of the gospels, because of who is involved and invited into the story: older and younger; women and men; Jewish religious insiders *and* foreigners & outsiders.

Speaking of foreigners and outsiders: as part of this shift to a wider reach of God's Kingdom and God's love, Simeon is the first to announce that Jesus has come as a light to the Gentiles. The messiah was expected to be the savior of the Jewish people. But Simeon is announcing the fulfillment of the promise that the good news of God's love would be for non-Jewish people as well—that Jesus would God's gift *for the world*. A light to the Gentiles. That sounds like an innocent statement, but it represents a seismic shift in their understanding, in that day, of who is included in God's Kingdom and God's favor. It's going to include non-Jewish people! There will be more on this as we move through Luke's gospel. This is the signature of Luke's gospel; he the most aware of Jesus' ministry to Gentiles and outsiders of all the gospel writers, so we will meet a wide array of characters as we move through Luke.

The good news of great joy, as the angels put it, is that a Savior has been born. And this savior lived an ordinary life, to meet us and work through us in our

ordinariness—with a little bit of extraordinary along the way—so that we, and the world, will know God’s love in a tangible way.

At this time of year we give and receive *presents* (‘ts’). God wants us to receive *presence* (‘ce’) every day of the year.

A man named Brother Lawrence, who was a layperson & not a priest or religious professional, wrote a classic little book titled, *Practicing the Presence of God*. In it he talks about ways to experience the presence of God, in Christ, through ordinary everyday activities, because Jesus lived an everyday life too and wants to meet us in our ordinary everyday activities. So, he describes becoming aware of Jesus as he is washing dishes, or doing laundry, going for a walk, or chopping wood, or reading a book, eating a meal, or having a conversation with a friend. He doesn’t put forth any specific spiritual methods or exercises. He says he simply tries to bring himself into an awareness of God’s presence in whatever he is doing, because Jesus did the same things in his life. Ok, Jesus didn’t use an ipad or smart phone, but he did communicate with people. The point is, this is the meaning of—and one way to practice—incarnation: to try to make ourselves aware that God with us in every detail of our lives.

As we head into 2022, amid uncertainty about what the year holds, or what the future holds in general, we *can* be certain of this: God, in Christ, is with us.

And this God, in Christ, is love.