

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 52: 1-3
SECOND LESSON: Luke: 2: 21-38
December 31, 2023

“One Week Later . . .”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

The author of Luke’s gospel combines and simplifies the Jewish rites of passage for the infant Jesus. A week after his birth he was circumcised. One month later Jesus would have been “redeemed” from the obligation of the firstborn to serve as a priest by the payment of five shekels, money that traditionally then went to the upkeep of the Temple. Six weeks after his birth Mary and Joseph would have taken Jesus to the Temple so that Mary could make the offering required after giving birth to a son. She gave the poor person’s offering, “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.” Luke, writing as he was for a Gentile audience, blended all of these acts together. His point was that the earthly parents of Jesus were faithful and law-abiding Jews. For us this story comes one week later, and the actual timing of the events described is uncertain. But there are seasons in our lives when little seems to change from one week to the next. This is deceptive. Change is all around us, and occasionally, like when the news does one of its wonderful retrospectives on all the people we have lost in the past year, we realize how fast life actually moves.

Of all the gospels Luke is the most inclusive. There is never a story about a man that does not also have a story about a woman. And in this case both men and women are represented in the form of two elderly and godly individuals, Simeon and Anna. Simeon lived in Jerusalem. We are told that he was righteous and devout, and that he was waiting for “the consolation of Israel.” The Holy Spirit guided his life, and moved by the Spirit he went to the temple courts the day Mary and Joseph came. We are not told how he knew that Jesus was the child he was looking for, only that he did. He was moved by the Spirit and proclaimed,

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

But Simeon’s words also had a dark side. He spoke to Mary in particular, saying, “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” It is not only likely but almost certain that Joseph was no longer alive when Jesus

began his ministry, because he is never mentioned later in the gospels. It is Mary who will carry this burden.

We make light of the “I have good news and I have bad news” trope. *The good news is the operation was a complete success. The bad news is they cut off the wrong leg.* But life almost always combines good and bad. Mary was given the most important role in history—raising God’s son. But with that glorious reality came deadly opposition and the cross. Bad things happen in life. They happen because of the imperfect nature of our world, and they happen because we live in a spiritual battle of good versus evil. We can experience both random misfortune, and direct opposition. The choice is not whether or not we will face trials and struggle, but how we choose to deal with it when it comes.

Rick and Kay Warren, recently retired pastors of the Saddlebrook Church, experienced this reality throughout their life and ministry together. Normally I’m not a fan of mega churches, but I am impressed with the Warrens, and the fact that their church got kicked out of the Southern Baptist Convention because he ordained three women. When Rick wrote *The Purpose-Driven Life* it became a best seller overnight. Suddenly they had more money than they knew what to do with, and a lot of public attention. But at the same time, his wife was diagnosed with cancer. The Warrens did not change one thing in their lifestyle. They didn’t buy a single new thing. They used the money to serve God by helping those most in need. When Rick Warren was interviewed he said, “Life is a series of problems: either you are now in one, or you’re just coming out of one, or you’re getting ready to go into another one.” He also said, “I believe that life is kind of like two rails on a railroad track, and that at all times you have something good and something bad running in your life.”

Rick Warren has had an amazingly successful ministry. And every time he preached he suffered extreme pain due to a rare neurological disorder. His wife has battled cancer several times. His son committed suicide at the age of 27. They have experienced the heights of success and the absolute depths of human despair, often at the same time.

Mary had the most significant role in human history. That she was chosen was the greatest honor imaginable. But the blessing had a cost, because good cannot enter the world without evil coming against it. Where there is light there is also darkness.

As Simeon finished speaking his words of warning they were approached by Anna, described by Luke both as a prophet and a widow. Her identification as a widow, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher was standard. Her identification as a prophet was not. Anna’s marriage lasted only seven years. She never remarried after her husband died. When we meet her, she is eighty-four, an astounding age for the time. While she certainly would not have slept in the Temple, she spent the majority of her time there worshipping, but Anna would have not been able to go farther than the court of women where this encounter took place. Although called the court of women, both genders were allowed in this courtyard, it is just that this was as far as women were permitted to go. The court of women was an open court with covered side porticos. Large semi-circular stairs led to the court of men, beyond which was the Temple itself. It also contained the treasury. Jesus often preached there. It was here that he commended the widow for giving all that she had. On this

day, Anna approached Mary, Joseph, the infant Jesus and Simeon, and she also added her voice to Simeon's giving thanks to God for the child Jesus and looking forward to the **redemption** of Jerusalem.

Redemption is a word that today does not have the power of the original context. We redeem coupons! We talk about people with "no redeeming virtues or features." But the metaphor of redemption comes from the slave market. It's about purchasing freedom. It's a ransom paid to free someone. Jesus was seen as the one who will purchase redemption for his enslaved people. Tragically, this redemption came to be interpreted in military and political terms. Many looked for the Messiah to redeem Israel from the Romans, but Jesus came to bring about spiritual redemption and to restore us to a right relationship with God.

Did Simeon and Anna understand the full impact of the prophetic words they both spoke. It's likely they did not, and yet God still used them to speak those words into existence. Regardless of where we are in space and time we are limited by that space and time, but God has no such limitations. Joseph will not live to see his son's ministry. Mary will worry over his safety and grieve at the attacks launched against him. She will stand at the cross with him till he takes his last breath. Blessing and suffering will come together.

Both Simeon and Anna were at the end of their lives. They had waited a long time for the Messiah. We don't want to wait for anything, and we want to rush through negative experiences as quickly as possible. I remember at an earlier time in my life resenting the grief that wracked me and robbed me of sunlight and joy. Life was so short, I felt that time spent in such darkness was a waste. But as an artist I know that without the darker colors woven in, a painting has no depth. And as a human being I know that people who skate through life on the surface without ever experiencing struggle have no depth. God may not cause the pain that comes our way, but God can most definitely use it for our good, and the good of those around us.

We are entering a new year. We don't know what is ahead. Who could have imagined 2020 before it happened? All we can know for sure is that there will be both darkness and light, and that the light which entered the world at Christmas, is stronger than any darkness. Amen

Isaiah 52: 1-3

1 Awake, awake, Zion,
 clothe yourself with strength!
Put on your garments of splendor,
 Jerusalem, the holy city.
The uncircumcised and defiled
 will not enter you again.
2 Shake off your dust;
 rise up, sit enthroned, Jerusalem.
Free yourself from the chains on your neck,
 Daughter Zion, now a captive.

³ For this is what the Lord says:
“You were sold for nothing,
and without money you will be redeemed.”

Luke: 2: 21-38

²¹ On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

²² When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

³³ The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.