

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 42: 1-7
SECOND LESSON: Luke 2:22-40
December 26, 2021

“What Child Is This?”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

Everyone was looking for the Messiah—a deliverer. They sought freedom from Roman oppression. They sought vindication and recognition as a great nation. Some sought glory. But it was all about Israel, and only Israel. And it was concrete and real with prosperity and victory. All injustices would be righted. All of the people would be blessed. Of spiritual salvation and deliverance from sin there was not a word. That the Gentiles might be welcomed in was unthinkable. If Gentiles were included at all in the end times visions of some it was in the form of servants to the Israelites. Just like today most people could only picture things that were familiar in limited concrete ways. But Simeon and Anna saw something more.

The offering presented by Mary and Joseph forty days after Jesus’ birth was two young pigeons. This was the purification offering made by the poor. It was actually made on behalf of Mary after giving birth to a son. If Mary and Joseph had been better off financially they would have been expected to sacrifice a one-year-old lamb as a burnt offering. Luke appears to combine two different rites, perhaps because they took place on the same day. The second ceremony was the presentation of Jesus to the Lord. Under the law five shekels were to be paid on the occasion of the birth of the first son, symbolic of the parents “buying back” their child from God. A kind priest would only take the money symbolically and then hand it back. This would have been a great financial hardship for the poor otherwise. It is obvious that Jesus’ parents took the practice of their faith very seriously. It is also obvious that they were not rich.

What Mary and Joseph were not expecting the day they fulfilled their religious obligations on behalf of Mary and Jesus was to be approached by two strangers who would prophesy over Jesus. The Temple was a busy place, and Mary and Joseph were just two tiny figures in the middle of it all. It would have been hard to pick them out in a crowd, and yet this is exactly what happened. Unlike the way we perform baptism as part of a worship service, dedications and purification offerings were made as needed. Many couples would have stood in line the same day for the same reasons. And it was in this crowded noisy space that Mary and Joseph made their way home through the Court of Women having completed what they came to do. At some point they were approached by the two strangers, Simeon and Anna. Simeon proceeded to proclaim wonderful and frightening things about the baby in Mary’s arms, and Anna announced the good news of Jesus to all standing by.

Simeon's words about Jesus were very specific. They were a blessing, but a blessing mixed with sorrow. Simeon told Mary, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." Jesus' ministry will challenge and confront the status quo. There will be strong opposition. It will be distressing to know that it is the religious leaders who are attacking him. It will be painful to hear the terrible things that will be said, and to fear for his safety. And the cross will be the most terrible day of all. God honored Mary by choosing her, but that honor was also a great burden. Being faithful to God does not mean that everything will go smoothly. Sometimes it means the opposite of that. It is not a spiritual failure on the part of God or us when hard times come.

Anna was the second elderly person to approach Mary and Joseph. She was 84 years old and scripture refers to her as a prophet. Widowed young, she had devoted her life to prayer and worship. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about Jesus to the people standing around. Two elderly saints, a man and a woman, spoke on behalf of God. They had waited a lifetime to do so.

We are busy and impatient people. We expect instant gratification. We hate to be kept waiting. If someone doesn't answer my text in five minutes I want to know why. But remember when we had to send letters? And wait weeks? God works in an altogether different time zone from us and that hasn't changed just because we have become less tolerant and have shorter attention spans. Anna and Simeon waited their whole lives. For God a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day. When the answer to our prayers doesn't come right away, we need to keep in mind that God is still at work. God's plans are fulfilled in God's time. God is not going to Instant Message or text us. We're not going to get a response on email. Amazon is not going to deliver a divine answer tomorrow. We will have to be still and wait on God.

It is also worth noting that our perspective is not God's perspective. According to a worldly viewpoint Jesus' life was a tragedy. He was conceived out of wedlock. He grew up in poverty. He never married. At approximately thirty years of age, he abandoned all sensible means of supporting himself to become a wandering prophet. He was rejected and condemned by the religious and community leaders. Finally, he was arrested and put to death in the most cruel and humiliating way possible. From this standpoint it would have been better if Jesus had never been born. But God was at work in a deep and profound way in and through Jesus. As Christians we profess that God became incarnate in the birth of Jesus.

As we end a year that has been difficult for many of us, let us remember what Mary and Joseph had to bear and move forward together, trusting in the plans of God. This pandemic will not last forever. The struggles we experience in life will change with each day that passes. The crisis in our world and in our nation will continue to require us to pray and act as God guides. But God is with us in every step of way. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out." Amen

Isaiah 42: 1-7

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight;
I will put my Spirit on him,
and he will bring justice to the nations.
² He will not shout or cry out,
or raise his voice in the streets.
³ A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.
In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;
⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged
till he establishes justice on earth.
In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”
⁵ This is what God the Lord says—
the Creator of the heavens, who stretches them out,
who spreads out the earth with all that springs from it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:
⁶ “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,
⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

Luke 2:22-40

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.

³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.