

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 52: 7-10
SECOND LESSON: Luke 2: 22-40
December 27, 2020

“Jesus’ First Journey to the Temple”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

It was the beginning of December and a mother noticed her four-year-old little girl putting on her hat and coat. She asked her where she was going. The little girl replied that she was going outside to walk down the street. She wanted to see if Christmas really was just around the corner. *There’s nothing like a literalist.*

I remember the excitement of waiting for Christmas as a child. I was a fortunate child whose parents actually bought and wrapped Christmas presents, and we all got more than one. Expectations were always high that Christmas morning would bring gifts to delight. My absolute most favorite gift ever was a sewing box full of everything I needed to make clothes for my dolls. I was a crafty little thing. I was bursting with happiness and could hardly wait to get started. That particular year Christmas had been worth the wait. But as an adult Christmas morning changed. I am no longer focused on what I might get. I am hoping that what I got for others will strike that same chord—hoping that I got it right. And as an adult Christmas also means a lot of work and preparation. Adults have to make Christmas happen, and for many, Christmas doesn’t happen at all. More people than ever spent Christmas alone this year.

In the 1st century there was no Christmas. The Romans had a mid-winter feast called Saturnalia that they looked forward to with feasting and gift giving. We have borrowed a lot of those traditions. But for the Jews there was little to celebrate. Everywhere they looked it was clear that their land was occupied by a conquering power. Soldiers patrolled the streets. The invaders were arrogant and oppressive. No longer a sovereign nation, Israel had become just another Roman province. Jewish leaders only led if they cooperated fully with Rome. Law was imposed from outside, and the tension between Judaism and Roman religion and custom was felt everywhere. But when Jesus was born the Temple still existed. It was still at the very center of Jewish faith and practice, and Mary and Joseph, being devout Jews, visited the Temple at regular intervals during their married life, beginning with Jesus’ first journey to the Temple.

Luke was writing to a predominately Gentile audience after the destruction of the Temple so he simplified and combined the Jewish legal requirements he describes. Jesus would have already been circumcised at eight days old. Only Mary needed to complete a purification rite after giving birth. Jesus need not have even been there for that. According to Leviticus: “When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year-old lamb for a burnt offering

and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering.” (Leviticus 12:6) However, Leviticus 12: 8 adds, “But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering.” Because Mary and Joseph offered “a pair of doves or two young pigeons” we know that they were poor. The second ceremony concerned the consecration of a first-born son to God and payment of five silver shekels. This ceremony is still conducted today. Finding equivalent currency is always a challenge! The history behind this is complex. Originally, the first-born sons of the patriarchs were to serve as priests for the family and were consecrated as such. This changed when the people sinned in the wilderness and worshipped the golden calf. Only the nation of Levi did not participate, and so from that point on the entire tribe of Levites became the priestly caste. The first-born sons of the other tribes were technically disqualified, but they had to be redeemed from service. A payment to exempt them was determined to be five shekels. The dominant interpretation of the story was that all firstborn males from that time forward had to be redeemed in this way. But five shekels of silver was a lot of money for people as poor as Mary and Joseph! A ram cost two shekels. If they couldn’t afford a lamb to sacrifice, how on earth could they come up with five shekels! There are three possibilities. First, some priests voluntarily return the money. Second, there may have been a waiver for the poor. Third, Jesus was never redeemed from his duty to serve as a priest, and that is exactly what he did as our savior. The scripture itself makes no mention of the five shekels, but only the Jewish believers would have realized it was missing.

And then came two unusual encounters--two elderly people unconnected with one another, a man and a woman. Simeon was described as righteous and devout. God had assured him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah. He was moved by the Spirit that day to enter the Temple courts. This event must have taken place in the Court of Women because Mary was there. And as soon as Simeon laid eyes on Jesus he knew. He knew that this was the child. And he took Jesus into his arms and praised God, saying, “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.”

Simeon had been waiting a very long time, a lifetime in fact. Day after day, year after year, he had prayed for Israel. And finally, finally the day had come! He was content after his long wait that he had seen the child born. But he also had words of warning, telling Mary: “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.” Those in power will do anything to retain their power, and Jesus will be seen as a threat. There will be pain and suffering along the way.

At the very moment Simeon pronounced these words the family was approached by another elderly person, a prophet named Anna. As patriarchal as this culture was it is wonderful that the good news came through both a man and a woman. Anna was an 84-year-old widow who spent her days worshipping, fasting and praying. She too prophesied, giving thanks to God and speaking about the child to all who were there looking forward to the

redemption of Jerusalem. Simeon told Mary and Joseph about Jesus. Anna told anyone who would listen.

Waiting is not easy. Every day my dogs wait for me to take them on a walk. They prefer the park. They'll settle for the neighborhood. They're very patient, for awhile. But eventually they wake up and start to give me "the look." Sandy's dog Sabrina stayed with us for a week while he was in the hospital and she very quickly got with the program. And they all know the routine. If Mom gets her water bottle filled up that means the park. She locates the coat, the mask and the leashes. Then comes the boots. At that point they are dancing. Finally, the harnesses go on and we are out the door! When I think about it, dogs spend an awful lot of time waiting for humans, and most of the time, they're pretty patient. But I'm not very patient. I do not like to wait. Waiting for the results of Vicki's Covid test is taking forever. They said 3 to 5 days. It's now day 6. But waiting is not empty time. Waiting is praying time. Waiting is sitting before God and seeking God's will time. When we wait on God for answers our spiritual muscles are being exercised. And waiting doesn't mean that we stop doing, only that we stop running recklessly ahead of God.

We miss life if we ignore the waiting times. If we are in such a hurry to get to tomorrow that we barely pay attention to today then we waste the precious gift of life. And then there is this fact. Fulfillment doesn't mean the end of things. It is just a new beginning. We might wait for a new job, but once we get that new job we have to actually do it! Simeon and Anna waited for Jesus to arrive in the world, but it was just the beginning. After this momentous day when Mary and Joseph had been told all these amazing things about their son, they went home and got on with life. Diapers still needed to be changed. Work still needed to be done.

We are waiting right now. We are waiting for the vaccine to arrive and be delivered to everyone. We are waiting for an end to this terrible pandemic. We are waiting for students to be able to go back to school and restaurants to be able to reopen. Many of us are waiting to see our loved ones, temporarily apart to help stop the spread of the disease. And many people are waiting for desperately needed economic help from the government. So how do we live? How do we walk through this valley we are in? The only thing we can do. We wait with faith, and we seek to do God's will today. We do the next right thing. And we do the next thing right. Life may include dramatic turning points, but truly it all comes one moment at a time, one day at a time. Amen.

Isaiah 52: 7-10

How beautiful on the mountains

are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
"Your God reigns!"

⁸ Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy.

When the Lord returns to Zion,
they will see it with their own eyes.
⁹ Burst into songs of joy together,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
¹⁰ The Lord will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see
the salvation of our God.

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.