

January 1, 2012
First Sunday after Christmas

Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3
Luke 2:22–40

“The Ponderings of Our Hearts”

In the manner that Luke tells the story of Jesus’ birth and the weeks following, it seems as though Mary and Joseph have not been back to Nazareth since leaving to be registered in Bethlehem for the purposes of Roman taxation. The details are not critical to the greater story, but we are told that prior to the family’s going to the Temple in Jerusalem for their “purification according to Mosaic Law,” the baby had already been circumcised on the eighth day and given the name of Jesus. There has been a great deal of activity for this family in the early days after the child’s birth, and there is still more to do.

Since Nazareth is some seventy miles, or so, north of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, it makes sense that this devout, Jewish couple would take care of other essential business while they were in the city and near the Temple. We are left to speculate about the reason for the “rite of purification” for this family, except to observe that Mary and Joseph were serious about their faith, and would have been sure to take care of any religious matters that needed to be attended.

According to Leviticus 12:2–8, forty days following the birth of a male child (or eighty days following the birth of a female child) the mother was obligated to present an offering in the Temple, so that the priest on duty could make atonement on her behalf and she could be clean. The usual offering was a lamb, but if the woman could not afford the lamb, she could substitute two pigeons or two turtledoves. In our lesson we see the couple, specifically Mary, in obedience, taking the baby to the Temple for the occasion of her own purification; and secondly to present Jesus to the Lord; ...to offer him, to give him up, as mandated by the Law in Exodus 13:1–2, to the Lord:

“The Lord said to Moses:
‘Consecrate to me all the firstborn;
whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites,
of human beings and animals,
is mine.”

Imagine this ...it’s a hard thing to do. I told you what my mother said when I told her I had been called to ministry in the church and I was going to seminary. She looked at me in amazement, shook her head, and said, “Don’t do it.” If my mother, for nearly fifty years the wife of

a Presbyterian Minister, had known at the time I was born what she knew at the end of her life, and she were Jewish, I know she would have protested in ecclesiastical disobedience and without flinching have refused to dedicate me to a life in ministry!

Even though my mother's name was Mary, and even though she was a woman of deep faith and conviction, the Mary in our story was different. Taking her baby, Jesus, to the Temple was an act of faith that recalled the faith of Hannah, in the Old Testament, when she presented her son, Samuel, to be given over to the service of the Lord.

It is inevitably a costly thing to be obedient in our faith. We see this young couple, dirt poor, unable to afford a lamb, scraping together enough to buy two pigeons to sacrifice to the Lord. It's not enough to give all you have in absolute obedience to God; still more sacrifice is always required on their part, ...and on our parts as well. That's the way it always is. When do you suppose we will ever learn that all we have in this life does not belong to us? All we have, including our very lives, belongs to God; and sacrifice is always required as part of the benefit of belonging to the Lord.

This is, I believe, the central point of this lesson on the purification of Mary and the presentation of the child to God. Jesus does not belong to Mary, or to Joseph. He does not belong to us. He belongs to God. And God was on the verge of turning around, in an act of self-sacrifice on His own part, and give the child, His most treasured and beloved Son, back to all of us, that we might come to know the depth and the breadth of God's love for us. It is like Martin Luther said:

"God became small for us in Christ;
He showed us his heart,
so our hearts might be won."

(Howell, James C. Feasting on the Word. Year B, Vol. 1, pg. 168)

Earlier this year I read the first novel, One Foot in Eden, written by the emerging southern author, Ron Rash, a professor of English at Western Carolina University. The novel is set in the Jocassee Valley in upstate South Carolina just after the Korean War. The story is a gripping murder mystery in which there is no mystery to the reader as to "who dun it." The suspense is to be found in other elements of the plot. The story is told from the perspective of five different characters: the Sheriff, the Deputy, Amy Holcombe, Billy Holcombe (Amy's husband), and Isaac Holcombe (Amy's and Billy's son). The

fascinating thing about the murder mystery is the manner in which Rash tells it. The story builds as each of the five characters tells their side of what happened as they knew it and experienced it, weaving a complex tapestry that ultimately develops as one story told from, many different perspectives. This is exactly the way it is with all of us and the story we are writing here and now, made up of all our own, unique individual stories. We all see and experience the same things differently.

If we take this approach to thinking about Mary and Joseph going to the Temple for purification, and taking Jesus for presentation, we begin to see that this baby, who He truly is, ...from the very beginning, is from God. He belongs to God. Everyone's perspective proclaims this. He is the fulfillment of prophecy, the coming of God's salvation.

Mary and Joseph went to the Temple for specific purposes, as acts of obedience in their faith. They likely thought it would be a low profile day of religious observance. When they arrived, Simeon happened to already be there, invited, as Luke tells us, by the Holy Spirit. Simeon was an elderly man, righteous, devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel (confident that one day peace would come to Israel). Simeon was filled with Holy Spirit (Luke says this three times in three different ways). It had been revealed to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. There is no indication that these young parents had any idea who Simeon was or what his personal religious experiences had been. So we can only imagine their surprise when, as they entered the Temple, they were approached by this elderly man who swooped down and took the baby from Mary's arms, and proceeding on his own to do the honors of presenting the Child to the Lord on his own volition. Simeon, as it turns out, was acting in obedience to the Lord, just as were Mary and Joseph.

With babe in arms, Simeon speaks first to God:

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

(Luke 2:29-32)

I think it is important to note that Simeon, looking at the Child in his arms said, "...my eyes have seen your salvation." Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were amazed at what was being said about the baby. Then Simeon turned and blessed them, saying to Mary:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed---and a sword will pierce your own soul too."
(Luke 2:34b-35)

Good news, bad news, I suppose. What are Mary and Joseph to make of all this? Who knows? But just as with the shepherds in Bethlehem, she was left to treasure these words and to ponder them in her heart. She had to know with growing assurance as time passed, that everything happening to them was well beyond her control. All of this was in fact God at work in the world bringing salvation to Israel, and as Simeon has now prophesied, to the Gentiles as well, all people of the world.

Then there was this other character present, Hanna, who was completely independent from Simeon, though each was surely familiar with the other. Hanna was in her eighties, married for a short time, but a widow for many, many years. Being homeless, she spent virtually her entire life at the Temple, living there; worshipping, fasting and praying night and day. While Simeon prophesied, ...speaking first to God and then to the parents of the baby, Hanna went over to see what all the excitement was about. When she saw the baby in old Simeon's arms, something, ...or rather someone, came over her. She began to praise God and to speak to all the people that were there, telling them that this baby was a sign that the redemption of Israel is near. Again, what must Mary and Joseph have thought? Still more for Mary to treasure, and to ponder in her heart. When all was done, according to the Law, the couple returned with the baby to Nazareth to watch, and wait, and wonder as to what would come next, pondering all these things in their hearts. But for now, they could only hope that life might resume with some facsimile of normalcy.

As I read back through the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus, the stories of Elizabeth, Zechariah, Mary and Joseph, I think about them, those characters, wondering about the impact and the meaning their life experiences had for them, and how their individual stories would come together to tell the story of God's intervention into history, telling the greater story of our salvation. Certainly, as they all

pondered all they had seen, heard and experienced, their faith was strengthened. But I wonder also about the stories of our lives and the things we have seen, heard and experienced ... the things you have seen, heard and experienced in your life that confirm for you God's involvement in your life and in all our lives. God is raining down showers of blessings upon us, and sometimes the richest blessings come out of the deepest tragedies in our lives.

During the beautiful carols and lessons from scripture that we heard here on Christmas Eve, I caught myself pondering a number of things that have happened in my life in recent years. Today is Belva's and my sixth wedding anniversary. Before I ever met Belva, my first marriage ended devastatingly, as did hers; I lost my home; followed shortly thereafter by losing my job at Peachtree Presbyterian Church. I thought my life was over. And then major health issues came up. Again, I thought I was done. How does one support four children with no home base, no job, and major health concerns?

Then I met Belva. I'll leave it to her to tell you about the trials of her pilgrimage. But in the course of our relationship and marriage, and through a casual, make friendly conversation with a customer in a carpet showroom in Atlanta, GA, while the Visa card was being run, the seed of our relationship with a Pastor Nominating Committee in Florence, AL was planted and began to grow. Though a long time resident of Georgia, I had never before stopped in Alabama for any reason other than to fill my tank with gas. What a blessing this journey has been! I don't talk about these things a lot because I know some of you don't want to hear about it. But on Christmas Eve I, like Mary, was treasuring all the things I have seen, heard and experienced, ...pondering them in my heart, giving thanks, ...realizing that I have very little control over most of what is going on in my life. My life, like your lives, belongs to God. When we give them over to Him, He will take us; He will guide us; He will use us according to His purposes, if we allow Him.

How do you see and experience God active in your life? What is the story you ponder in your heart? Treasure those things. Give thanks. Tell someone about them. Be witnesses to the wonder of God's work in your lives. Perhaps this can be all of our New Year's resolutions, ...that is, for us to present ourselves anew, ...to recommit and give our lives back to God.