

I don't know about you, but 2016 doesn't even sound like a proper number for a year. Each 12-month that passes by, the number of it just gets more outrageous; it's like we're in Star Trek, and the year is part of the captain's log: Star Date, 2016. I guess it means that, ready or not, we really are living in the future. It's not that the past was always so wonderful, but it was familiar. The change of the years, from old to new, is a time for us to look back- maybe with regret or longing- and to look ahead- perhaps with anticipation or fear; whichever, it is one measurable turning point in our lives, or a balancing point. And that point is simply the present, where past and future meet. And the meaning for us is to try to live in that present moment, and not in the past or the future. This seems to me an important insight for our emotional and psychological lives, as well as for our religious and communal, and social and cultural lives.

And so, I am glad that I selected this passage from the lectionary for today's sermon text. Because we have here Mary and Joseph obeying the commandments, bringing Jesus to the Temple to dedicate him to God. He had already been circumcised and named at eight days old; that in verse 21. But here, it is probably forty days later, and they offer a sacrifice to purify Mary after giving birth- to

make her clean again, and thus able to share in community life. This activity is the family holding to their past and to their traditions- like all good religious people, their present taking shape out of their past. And then afterward, this, “when they had performed everything according to the law,” as verse 39 tells us, they returned home, back to Nazareth, where their future begins.

But there is even more. In the story are two old people, Simeon, in verses 25-35, an old man ready to die, just waiting for God’s Messiah to be born. And Anna, a woman who may be eighty-four years old, or who may have lived for eighty-four years after her husband died. Wouldn’t you think they represent the past? Certainly, the good years- their futures- were behind them. And yet, they are eagerly anticipating God’s great work; Anna is looking for the “redemption of Jerusalem”; and Simeon rejoices to see at last, “God’s salvation, the light for Gentiles, and God’s glory shining over Israel.” Two ancient people, but not desperately clinging to the past; they find themselves at the changing of the ages- from past to future- and they joyfully welcome in the new age.

So here are Luke’s first words in his narrative about the life of Jesus. Earlier, he had been born, and Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and shepherds came to see him; now he has been circumcised, and consecrated in the

Temple, and pawed over by a couple of old people, and then taken home. Verse 40 completes the passage, telling us that Jesus grew, as children will do; he was healthy, growing stronger; he was learning- “filled with wisdom,” the gospel says- so we know he wanted to learn, he was curious; and God’s favor, or grace, was upon him- in other words, he was seeking God, and God was watching him.

For two hundred years and more, scholars have been searching deeply, in the gospels and outside the gospels in ancient records of governors and emperors and historians, for the real Jesus, Jesus the man, the historical Jesus. The “quest for the historical Jesus” it is called, and despite what some will say, it does not try to disprove Jesus, it is the effort to discover what the gospels may not explain, and what they sometimes gloss over. I said a minute ago that our scripture has the first words about Jesus, but that isn’t exactly true, because even before his birth, he had already been announced: to Mary, the angel said he would be holy and great, a king, and Son of the Most High God; to Joseph, the angel said Jesus would be God with us, would be the deliverer- that’s what his name meant; to the shepherds, the angel called him Messiah, Savior, Lord. And these are the titles we still use to worship him. But they don’t tell us anything about Jesus the human. And that is what the “quest” is about: who Jesus was behind these royal and sacred titles.

It's been a long search, as I said two hundred years, and almost never has it satisfied. There has been much learned about the text of scripture, about the cultural settings of the gospels; a deeper understanding of Jesus, but never the definitive word: because he lived a long time ago, and because almost everything written about him is worshipful. The gospel writers started with these titles, and then wrote to prove them: they were not concerned with actual history, but faith.

Thus, it is a valid question whether or not we should be concerned with his history, though we can get so awfully confused without it. Like this scene in one of the great movies, *Little Big Man*, when Mrs. Pendrake, the pastor's wife, is giving young Jack Crabb spiritual instruction and tells him, "Moses was a Jew, but Jesus was a Gentile." How many other things have we got wrong about him in the past two thousand years? So many things.

It is easy for us to misinterpret the parables, or to read as factual the commentary the gospel writers make of his life; easy to mistake Jesus' meaning in so many of his teachings. But in our passage is the starting point for seeing Jesus clearly: he was a Jew. We can discuss what it means to call him Lord, Savior, Son of God- people have different understandings of those titles, but Jesus was a son of the poor, lived in an out of the way place, grew up among a people despised and

burdened down by the elite- by the ruling class of his own nation and by their brutal Roman overlords.

But this is where we can start to figure out who Jesus was: Jesus the Jewish baby, the growing Jewish boy, and the Jewish man; and from this we may begin to see anew what his teachings mean; there may be occasions in which we learn to hear his words in a whole new way. Still, words of blessing to us, but perhaps a demand, too, so that they can become a blessing for others: for the poor and the hurting, and the scorned. *He was one of them.* And seeing him in that way, and reading the stories about this man, may be the first step in building a better future for all of us.

Now, most of us in this church are closer to the ages of Simeon and Anna than we are to the baby that was presented in the Temple that day. And at a certain maturity, the tendency is to hold on to what makes us comfortable- nothing wrong with that. We are in this church today because we enjoy worshipping God in a particular way. But we are wrong if we think God is not operating in other ways; we are in another age now, and God is moving in ways we may not want to move. And we cannot simply say, with smug confidence, that can't be God's way,

because we just don't know everything. Besides, haven't we been surprised by God in the past? So, we must let God work out his promises for other people, and for their future.

Preparing for this sermon, I read something the great Fred Craddock wrote about this passage. "God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory; and the new is God keeping an old promise." So, if we hold faithfully to the past, we almost cannot help but welcome the future, as did Simeon and Anna. At least, that is our task, to worship and rejoice together, and to be glad that God is at work in the world around us, making promises come to pass in ways we do not yet recognize. In 2016, God is doing something new. Let us in this present moment with open eyes find our part in that work.