

“Christmas Is Over, Now What?”

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John Knox Presbyterian Church – December 27, 2015

Yes, Christmas really happened. Over 2000 years ago Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. Angels appeared to shepherds living in fields and announced the birth of a savior. These same shepherds go to Bethlehem to see the child and after seeing him, they leave glorifying and praising God for all they have seen and heard. Mary, Joseph and the child are left, an ordinary family who we might say have had an extraordinary experience but now it is over. What happens now?

We have just celebrated Christmas, a time of joy for some, a time of sadness for others. But now it is back to the ordinary. For some a letdown for others a glad it's over. But what has it been all about? As Christians we have celebrated the birth of Christ. But now the celebration is over where do we go from here. In the ordinariness of daily life as we deal with the chaos of life, of politics, of issues within and without the Christian community where do we go? For some possible insights, Let turns to our scripture for today and see what happens in the life of Mary, Joseph and this child.

We see first that after eight days, the child was circumcised and called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived. Then after a total of 40 days or approximately 6 weeks, Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to Jerusalem to the temple to fulfill the purification rites as required by the law and to present Jesus to the Lord. . (Some background information) The Law of Moses found in Leviticus 12 required that if a woman conceived and bore a male child, she would be ceremonially unclean for seven days. The son would be circumcised on the eighth day. Then her time of blood purification would be another thirty-three days, during which time she was not permitted to touch any holy things or come into the sanctuary. When the days of her purification were completed-, she was to bring to the priest a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. If she could not afford a sheep, she was to bring two turtledoves or 2 pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. The priest would then make atonement on her behalf, and she would be clean. The second law addressed here is based in part on Exodus 13: 2 & 12 which required that every firstborn be consecrated to and set a part to the Lord. For the Jewish faith community, Circumcision was performed not merely for cleanliness purposes but was a holy act which made Jesus a part of the covenant people of God. Jerusalem and the temple were the center of Jewish worship, the focus of God's presence. The trip most likely by foot for Mary and Joseph from Bethlehem to Jerusalem was approx. 14 miles. Imagine walking this far with a six week old baby, no convenient rest areas with bathrooms and drinking fountains.

These acts of obedience to the Law of Moses and of their God as they understood them to be identify Mary and Joseph as devoted to their relationship with their God, a family that held that relationship as first priority.

We then see Mary, Joseph and Jesus in the temple. They have brought a pair of turtledoves or young pigeons for the offerings we are not told which but their offering does identify them as

from a lower income class of people when in comes Simeon, a righteous and devout man guided by the Holy Spirit. A man who was looking forward to the restoration of Israel and who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and praises God declaring that he can now go in peace for he has seen God's salvation, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel. Imagine Mary & Joseph's amazement. Remember the temple covered 35 acres and most likely Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the court of women. The court of women was the largest of the courts and could hold possibly 6000 worshipers at festival times. It was open to Jewish men, ritually clean Jewish women, ritually impure priests, Nazirites and even lepers so there would be numbers of people milling about. Imagine this busy place and these people coming together. Surely this was the work of the Holy Spirit. And at this time, in this place God through Simeon announces the most amazing news that now God's promise of a Messiah to Israel is being fulfilled in this child Jesus that Mary and Joseph are now presenting to the Lord.

As we go a little further in this passage we see however, that not everything is joyous, for Simeon also declares that this child will cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and will be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many would be revealed indicating there would be divisions within the people of Israel those who would receive him and others who would not. His ministry revealing the thoughts of their hearts and their lack of trust in God. All this would cause Mary pain and suffering

Then at this moment in comes Anna, a prophetess of the tribe of Asher, a widow after 7 years of marriage who is 84 years old. She has been devoted to a life of prayer and fasting within the temple. She begins to praise God and tells everyone who is looking for the redemption of Jerusalem about the child.

We are then quietly told that after everything required by the law is completed, the family returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And that the child grew in wisdom and God's favor was upon him.

So what is all this saying to us?

What do we see in Mary and Joseph? In their fulfillment of the laws of God, the sacrifices they offered, do we not see an attitude of obedience and worship? Do we not see devotion and love of God as first in their lives? And even though we no longer as Christians practice purification rites, sin offerings and burnt offerings or have circumcisions done for religious reasons, is not the attitude of obedience and worship an attitude that holds our God in high esteem, showing awe and respect for who God is. Does not our new testament scriptures say "If you love me, you will obey my commandments" and the greatest of all commandments spoken by Jesus is first that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.

Even today we are called as Christians to love God with an attitude of obedience and worship

What do we see in Simeon?

As we look at what is said about Simeon can we not see his trust in God, He has lived his life in that relationship and is content even as he faces death for he has seen the source of eternal life in Jesus. He has seen the Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation. Can we see in Simeon's life that our contentment in life is not based on externals money, power, sex, possessions but upon our trust and relationship with God, which transcends circumstances so that in whatever state we are we can be content.

What do we see in Anna? Here is an 84 year old widow who devoted her life to serving in the temple and to fasting and prayer. She see Jesus and becomes a credible witness speaking about the child to all those waiting for the Messiah. For us today, do our lives, our behaviors as Christians provide credibility to our witness of who Christ is. Do we share our faith with others through actions and speech? And to all of us who are older, retired or otherwise, does not Anna's life support that even late in life God can use us in ministry.

And as we look at all these people being brought together in a special place of God's presence, we see above all that God is working. God has brought together men and women, young and old in a small group, a small community and shared with them His promise of salvation for all peoples. Each person has a special purpose to fulfill.

Today God is still working to bring together God's people from every walk of life. We are here today because of God's call and we each have a special purpose to fulfill in God's plan. We are called to go and make disciples of all nations, to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, to teach, to nurture and to reach out to those who are not yet a part of the faith community. This does not mean it will be easy or without divisions and conflicts even as we see in Simeon's announcement to Mary and Joseph about Jesus and His ministry.

So as we leave here today to go back to the ordinariness of life, let us take with us and thoughtfully consider the challenges the lives of these people present to us.

The challenge to keep our relationship with God as first priority, to love God with an attitude of obedience and worship.

The challenge to trust God in all circumstances and to be at peace even as we all will eventually face death for we have eternal life in Christ our savior.

The challenge to live a life that provides credibility to our witness of who Christ is.

The challenge to remember that God is working in all things and we each have a special purpose to fulfill in God's plan

Lastly know that Christ our savior goes with you, to guide and direct, to offer grace and forgiveness, to provide strength and courage for He has said "I am with you always"

RESOURCES

The New Interpreters Study Bible
New Revised Standard Version
C 2003 Abingdon Press

Holy Bible, New International Version
C 1984 Biblica Inc.

Rose Guide to the Temple
C 2012 Bristol works, Inc.
Rose Publishing Inc.

The Writings of the New Testament
Luke T. Johnson
C 1986 Fortress Press

Luke, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
Robert C. Tannehill
C 1996 Abingdon Press

The Gospel of Luke,
Twenty First Century Biblical Commentary Series
C 2006 Tyndale Theological Seminary

The NIV application Commentary
Darrell L. Bock
C 1996 Darrell L Bock