

December 23, 2018

Lesson 4: Jesus: God's Loving Promise

Scripture: Luke 1: 26-31; 2: 21-35

Context:

Appropriately on this Sunday our lesson on loving God leads us to the story of Jesus's birth and the prophecy given by Simeon as Jesus is presented in the temple in Jerusalem. The first several chapters of the Luke are set up to tell how Jesus comes into a world of prophecy and heritage. Before the verses in this chapter, we find ourselves in Jerusalem, the city upon the hill where all come to worship Yahweh. We meet Zechariah who is told he will have a child in old age with his wife Elizabeth and the child will be the one to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

We move forward to the city of Nazareth and meet a young woman named Mary, a cousin of Elizabeth. Mary encounters an angel sent from God to tell her she will give birth to a child who will be Lord of all. As different as the stories may be with an angel approaching a young unmarried woman and an older couple, they are both stories of God's grace and power that reveals God's favor toward the world to work through all sorts of people.¹ God will work with all sorts of people in all sorts of places.

The next part of the lesson moves to after Jesus has been born and we return to the city of Jerusalem. Following in line with the fact that Jesus was born to Jewish parents, they go to the temple, a place that plays a central role in this gospel and in Jesus's ministry. Here the author combines two traditions that Jesus's parents will be fulfilling: the purification of the mother after childbirth, particularly a son (Leviticus 12:1-8) and the dedication of the firstborn son to God (Exodus 13:2, 12-16).² Mary and Joseph are following the Law from Moses and will raise their son in such a manner.

As they enter the temple, we meet one of the first characters outside of Jesus's family to reveal who he will be and what he means to the world. Simeon is a righteous man, an aged saint who is Israel in miniature and Israel at it best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises.³ As he sees the infant Jesus, he realizes that God has answered his prayers and he has seen the future. Now there will be a world where both Gentile and Jews will come together and light will shine throughout the land. Jesus's parents are amazed and as Simeon blesses him, he also warns this blessing comes with a price. He predicts both goodness and personal hardship that will come with the journey. The parent will bury the child, yet hope will be brought to the earth. It is a day of blessing and also foreboding.

Application

There are so many beautiful images that come to mind when I read these passages, both from the ancient world and from contemporary scenes we see today.

¹ Fred Craddock, "Luke," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1990), 26.

² *Ibid.*, 38.

³ *Ibid.*, 40.

The first passage of what is known as the Annunciation is one of the most recreated in the art world. Hundreds of artists have sought to catch that magic moment of the angel Gabriel approaching the young Mary. Countless music artists have pondered the feelings of Mary as she was given the role of birthing the Lord to the world.

When I went to the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth in my pilgrimage to the Holy Land this past January, I was awestruck by how this church is the place where people still gather to worship. Countless paintings surround the church with Mary and the infant Jesus, including every country having a picture of Mary and Jesus in their respective garb and ethnicity. The church architecture is rich in symbolism. To perhaps sit in the place where hope was announced to come to the world through a young girl constantly puts me in awe of the grandeur of our God. I hope you have places where you can be awestruck by God and are those places where the sacred meets the ordinary.

Yet this passage also brings also a daily application for how we are to live our lives with thinking of the future. Simeon is noted as an adult who is faithful in so many ways. Yet Simeon knows that there will be a time when he will not be a part of the future. He embraces that change is coming and that there are more hopeful things that will even surpass him. Simeon is not just to be uplifted for his prophetic acknowledgment of the Christ, he is also a model for us. How many times do we only focus on ourselves and what we accomplish today? We get territorial about certain ministries or ideas and pretty soon we shut ourselves off from growth or looking at different ways of doing things. We miss the bigger picture and that maybe the best way to honor God is to embrace change and trust that God will be faithful.

This passage also uplifts Mary and Joseph to us. Here they are obedient to the task that has been given them. Even though we as the readers know who Jesus will be and how the story will end, we do not know the innermost thoughts or feelings of Jesus's earthly parents. Maybe they did comprehend everything about Jesus from the messages of the angel Gabriel, but I would imagine there was still the challenge of how do you raise a child who will be great and is the Son of God. No pressure at all. Yet Mary and Joseph don't miss a beat. Mary accepts her role even though she is afraid of the angel at first. Joseph marries Mary even though she is already pregnant. And then after all that has happened, they continue to follow the Law from Moses and take their child to the temple to make the proper offering when he is still an infant.

Mary and Joseph's obedience is a model to us. Recently I had a chance to baptize the baby of two of my friends. The moment was even more holy to me because I know the parents after being in a small group with them and serving beside them on committees. I know that they will love the child and that the questions they were asked before he was baptized will be taken seriously. The child will be raised in a home with a family that will support and encourage them to the best of their ability. As the child grows, he will learn more about Jesus and will have the opportunity to also be a follower of Jesus all the days of his life. What a joy it is to think of how we will grow up and the amazing things he will do because of parents who are faithful and love the Lord with their hearts. Like Mary and Joseph, they will do the best they can and will faithfully serve our Lord.

A few questions to think about as today's lesson concludes: where do you find those holy places where you feel the sacred meeting the ordinary? Who are the Simeons you know and how do they influence you? Do you embrace change or cling to old ways? Do you think about the future and how you are helping prepare others for the journey? How are you obedient to God? How do you live into the promises as a member of

Christ's holy church, as a spouse, or as a parent? How do you pass on your faith to the next generation regardless of your marital or parental status? I hope this Advent season you have been able to reflect on those questions and marvel at the Christ child who brings hope and joy to the world.

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