

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday January 1, 2012

Luke 2:22-40

We have very few glimpses into the life of Jesus before he was an adult, thirty years old, ready to be baptized by John, and then to begin his ministry. But not only does Luke give us the story of Jesus' birth, he also gives us this picture of the Christ Child in his early infancy—at his beginning.

As a Jewish couple, with their firstborn male child, Mary and Joseph were required by Hebraic law to participate in two specific rituals at the beginning of their son's life. One was his circumcision, which would have taken place eight days after his birth. This was a sign of the child being an heir of the Hebrews' Covenant with God.

The other was the presentation in the temple, which we read about today. Since the time of Moses, it was required that each firstborn male be offered to the Lord as holy and dedicated to the Lord. In order to redeem their child, taking him home and raising him in the Jewish faith, a sacrifice was called for—a lamb for those who were wealthy or a choice of two turtle doves or two young pigeons for those in poorer circumstances. Due to their nearly impoverished status, Mary and Joseph offered two pigeons—the less costly of the two options.

The reason behind this dedication of every firstborn male to God had its roots in the enslavement of the Hebrew people—when God saved them from the plague of the slaughtering of the firstborn of all the Egyptians. This would be remembered by Jews in the Passover meal—which Jesus would someday transform into the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.

We know the mixture of joy and chaos, of sacred responsibility and utter exhaustion that accompanies the first week of having a new baby in the house. Imagine what it was like in a barn! While Mary was, no doubt, still pondering the miracle of her son’s birth in her heart; she was also recovering from childbirth and learning how to care for a helpless infant. I think it is safe to say that Mary and Joseph were taking things one day—or one hour—at a time. For the moment, at least, they were not thinking about stars and angels and shepherds; and the census and taxation seemed to be in the distant past. At present, they were focused on their child and on the first steps to be taken in raising him in the Jewish faith.

At the beginning of the life of a male child of Israel, entering into the rituals of faith were the first and foremost priorities of Jewish parents. There was a period of purification for women, following childbirth, and then the parents could bring their child was to temple for his presentation.

And so, Mary and Joseph, already in Jerusalem, took young Jesus to the temple and presented him there before the priest. This would be a special day in the life of a Jewish family, but it is most likely that Mary and Joseph had absolutely no idea how different this particular presentation would be from any other. For, following the required ritual, Jesus and his parents were approached by two different people—strangers to them—both of whom had been awaiting the birth of the Messiah, and they recognized the baby Jesus as the Anointed One.

The first was a man named Simeon. He was a devout Jew and spent much time in prayer and devotion to God. Guided to the temple by the Holy Spirit on that day, Simeon approached the child's parents and took baby Jesus into his arms, blessing him and praising God. Simeon had been promised by the Holy Spirit that death would not come to him until he had seen the coming Messiah with his own eyes. In his thanks to God, he gave thanks for "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." Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph and made continued prophecy regarding the child—some of which was quite foreboding. And we can assume that Mary took his words in and added them to the ones she was already pondering in her heart. And, with Simeon's words and blessings, both Mary and Joseph were reminded that the child in their arms was holy, and that they had entered into a sacred covenant with God.

The second one to approach him was a prophet from the tribe of Asher. Her name was Anna. She was a widow, eighty four years old, remaining in the temple day and night, praying and fasting. Just after Simeon returned Jesus to his parents, Anna came to them. She recognized the infant Jesus as the Messiah, and so she began to praise God aloud, sharing the Good News with all those who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

To have their baby boy recognized, blessed, and acclaimed by not one, but two, devout people in the temple must have been amazing to Mary and Joseph. More wonder, more to ponder.

According to Luke, the new family returned to their hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. They raised and nurtured Jesus there, and he became strong and wise. In all things, it was clear to his parents that their firstborn son was blessed with the favor of God.

In this brief story, recounted by Luke, there are many new beginnings....just following the birth of Jesus: The Jewish rituals at the beginning of a male child's life—the circumcision and the presentation in the temple; the words of strangers in the temple speaking of the new life the child would bring to Israel and to all peoples; and then the new beginnings of life in Nazareth.

There would, as we know, be many more important moments of beginning in the life of Jesus. Throughout the year we study them, pray over them, observe them, and celebrate them. Beginnings are important—and none more than the beginning of Jesus' earthly life.

Some of the events in today's scripture were beginnings of, or the roots for the Christian faith. As devout Jews, Mary and Joseph were observing the laws of the Old Covenant (some of which continue to be practiced by Jews today). One day Jesus would introduce the New Covenant which, for Christians, made the old laws obsolete. The New Covenant would offer grace and redemption to all the world.

As Christians, what are our beginnings?

First of all, our beginnings lie within the Jewish faith: Their stories are our stories, our heritage comes from theirs; and our love and worship are for the God we have in common.

Some of our beginnings as Christians come from the faith of our families of origin---those of us who were raised in the church, the stories and the rituals and the observances that define the ways we approach our lives.

For others of us, the beginnings of our faith come out of an experience of the Holy, or from the words or examples of others.

Like Jesus, as a Jew, we as Christians have rituals of entering into our faith. One of these is baptism—which may come in the form of our parents and congregation taking vows to raise us as Christians, or which may come later in our lives as our own personal choice. As we join the church, we have the rite of Confirmation in the faith for our young people, and of Affirmation of Faith for adults.

Yet, whatever and whenever the beginnings of our Christian faith may be, what we hold in common is the same love for Jesus Christ, and the joy of knowing, worshipping, and praising him.

And Christians hold another, very precious gift, in common—the grace and mercy of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Even the most devout Christian will experience moments of doubt or darkness; and times when we sense a need for renewal in our faith and the practices that help to sustain it. And, even at the strongest, steadiest seasons in our faith journeys, we sometimes need to stop and consider the practices that make our personal faith stronger, and how those things serve to translate our Christian faith to all.

There is no better day than the Lord's Day, on the very first day of the New Year to enter into new beginnings. This is a day and a season during which we can examine our faith; renew the parts that are tired or lagging; commit ourselves to strengthening those practices of faith which draw us deeper into the holy realm of God; and try new and different forms of prayer, study, and worship.

As with Jesus' presentation in the temple, today marks a new beginning for us.

We may not have Simeon or Anna here to prophesy or bless us—but we have one another—our family of faith. As we begin this New Year, we can make a commitment to God and one another to support each other in our faith journeys.

On this New Year's Day, as we gather around the communion table, and share the very meal which Jesus introduced at the Passover on the last night of his earthly life, let us remember the beginnings of this practice and of our faith. And may we, as Anna did, enter into this New Year praising God and sharing the Good News of the Christ Child and the redemption he brings to the world.

Let us begin anew. Amen.

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "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." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother 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." There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.