

Something Important Is On The Way

Dec. 31, 2023

Our passage from Luke today tells us something important is on the way. This something is actually very small --- it is the infant Jesus. Physically, he wasn't very big. Simeon, an elderly man, could pick him up. But Jesus was and still is hugely important. He would make a great difference in many people's lives. Luke tells us this in the hope that this little Jesus will make a big difference in our lives.

Our passage starts off low key. Joseph and Mary are doing the normal thing for Jewish parents where they lived. They're bringing their firstborn son to the Temple to be dedicated to God. There is nothing unusual here. Jesus is just one more little boy being brought to the temple for dedication. But the Holy Spirit is swirling around. When that happens in Luke's gospel or the book of Acts, something new and unexpected is about to happen. And it does. As Joseph and Mary bring Jesus into the Temple, an elderly man named Simeon, guided by the Spirit, comes along, takes Jesus into his arms, praises God, and announces that this child is the messiah that he has been waiting for. This little boy Jesus is going to grow up to become a great blessing to many people, the means of their salvation (Luke 2:27-32). Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were amazed at what Simeon was saying about Jesus. Simeon blesses them too and keeps rolling. This kid is really going to be something he says. Speaking to Mary, Simeon tells her that her little boy is going to be stone that some will trip and fall over, while others will find new strength in him. Then he adds, and a sword will pierce your soul too.

Next an elderly woman, Anna gets in on the act. She practically lives in the temple, fasting and praying there every day. Now that Simeon is done it is her turn. She starts praising God and speaking about Jesus to everyone who is looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. This little boy is going to be it, she says. He's what we've been waiting for.

Well, he wasn't it yet. He still had to grow up. But Luke wants us to know that God has things moving along right on track. None of this is a coincidence. It may be Simeon and Anna talking, but it is God who is speaking to us through them.

After all this commotion, Joseph and Mary took Jesus back to Nazareth, the small town where they lived. And there our passage ends.

Luke tells us all this because he doesn't want us to miss out. Something important is on the way – Jesus is the Messiah. You could easily think he was just another little boy, as his parents seem to have done. He's easy to overlook, easy to miss.

That is still the case today. Jesus is easy to miss. Christmas rolls around every year. We celebrate Jesus' birth. It's an annual thing, nothing out of the ordinary. But what we celebrate is out of the ordinary. That's what Simeon and Anna tell us. Well, okay, we know that. That's why we're here. We know who Jesus is. Or do we?

There is something odd in our passage for today. In the first chapter of Luke's gospel, the angel Gabriel comes to Mary and tells her that she will conceive and bear a child who will be holy, something special, the Son of God. Then when Jesus is born, an angel comes to some shepherds, tells them that the Messiah has just been born, and where. The shepherds go to see the child, and they tell Mary and Joseph what the angel had told them about Jesus. So Mary has heard twice, and Joseph at least once,

that their little Jesus is something special. Most parents, when they hear something like that said about their child, tend to remember it. So it is odd that when they take Jesus to the temple, they are amazed when Simeon and Anna tell them what a gift Jesus will be to so many people. Joseph and Mary already knew that. Or did they?

A person we will call Joe was once describing to a friend, who we will call Fred, how Joe's household operated. In the Star Trek television show and movies, there was a thing called the prime directive. This was an overarching rule that was supposed to guide all major decisions made by the captain and crew of the Starship Enterprise. I don't remember what it was exactly, but every now and then someone in the show or the movies would refer to it. Anyway, Joe told Fred that in Joe's household, there was also a prime directive. No major events were to happen, no major decisions were to be made, without Sarah, Joe's significant other, being duly informed and properly consulted beforehand. As Joe explained this to Fred, Joe mentally patted himself on the back for being such a 'with it' guy. Their conversation moved on to other matters. Soon they were discussing how they and their spouses should get together for dinner. Joe liked this idea. "Sounds great," he said. "You two come over to our place next Friday night. I'll tell Sarah you're coming." But then Fred said, "Shouldn't you check that out with Sarah first? What about the prime directive?" To which Joe replied, "Oh, yeah."

Joe knew about the prime directive. Or did he?

Mary and Joseph knew who Jesus was. When an angel tells you something, you remember it. Yet though they had been told that Jesus was the promised messiah, they were still amazed to hear about this from Simeon and Anna. We could say, Mary and Joseph knew who Jesus was. They had been told. But they hadn't really gotten their heads around it. They don't seem to have internalized this, so that it shaped how they thought about Jesus and how they understood the world and themselves. In the same way, Joe knew about the prime directive. At least, he thought he did. He could tell Fred all about it. But Joe hadn't really internalized the prime directive. He didn't fully understand its significance. He hadn't let it sink in so that it shaped the way he thought and acted.

What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ? He has caused the rising and falling of many. Because of him, people have stood up to corruption in public office and opposed it. Because of him, people have stood up for human rights, for the dignity of the marginalized, for justice for the oppressed. People have done such in the past. Many are doing it now in the present. Lots more will do it in the future. As this little child Jesus moves people to stand up in these ways, he has caused, is causing and will cause the fall of many. He has also caused the rising of many. He has made the weak strong. He has given the despairing hope. He has been a source of peace to the troubled. He has given the grieving comfort. He has done this in the past. He is doing it for many in the present. And he will do it for many in the future. As Jesus does all this, he is the cause of the rising of many.

That's why we're here. We know all this. Or do we?

Simeon told Mary that Jesus would be a sign that would be opposed. That was putting it mildly. Those of us who are familiar with the story know that Jesus was crucified. That is probably what Simeon's words to Mary about the sword that would pierce her heart referred to. But death was not the end of Jesus. Luke will tell us that Jesus rose to new life, and as the risen Christ, he was received by people who spread

the news, who received new hope, new life, new strength from him. Simeon and Anna are heralds of this. When this little boy grows up, they tell us, he will be a source of great hope and joy, great strength and inspiration. He's what people have been waiting for. "Don't miss out" Luke is telling us. Receive Jesus as the Christ just like Simeon and Anna did. Celebrate his coming. Give thanks to God. Share the good news with anyone who will listen, by word and deed. Take this to heart, let it sink into your soul and shape your life.

Luke tells us that Anna spoke about Jesus to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. I don't know about you, but I'm one of those people. Lately, I've been looking for redemption. In the past few months, like Mary, I've had a sword pierce my heart. The violence in Gaza and Israel is heavy on my mind and painful to my spirit. Previously I've been following the war in Ukraine and that has weighed me down. Now added to that are the deaths of so many innocent civilians in Gaza, and the plight of the living, with no safe place to go to, many bereft of food, shelter and medical care. I find it all very hard to take. And I know there are other conflicts around the world and other forms of suffering. I would give a lot to see peace in Gaza and Israel, peace in Ukraine and elsewhere.

Luke describes Anna as speaking about Jesus to all who were looking for redemption. I'm one of those people who needs to hear what she has to say. Like Mary and Joseph, I know about Jesus, who he is and what he means. But I think I need to hear it again. The great preaching professor Fred Craddock apparently used to say that it's very difficult to learn again what we already know. But perhaps hearing what Simeon and Anna had to say can help us. The little child whose birth we celebrated a week ago, the little boy that Mary and Joseph brought to the temple, he is the Christ.

He is present in all of the suffering in Gaza and the Ukraine and everywhere else. As he is present there, he brings hope and comfort that bombs can't destroy and bullets can't kill. Though the cruelty, violence, pain and loss of the world may be piercing our hearts and the heart of God, still through Christ we know that there is a love that is stronger than death, a love that is greater than hate. That doesn't take away the pain and loss in what's happening, but it can give us comfort and strength. From that love can come a peace and a hope that can lead us to give thanks to God and help us to follow where Christ leads.

In this time of war and violence, may we take the great good news of Jesus Christ to heart. May we respond to Jesus like Simeon and Anna. May what they say about Jesus sink into our hearts and shape how we see the world and ourselves. May it become for us a kind of prime directive. May it give us strength when the pain of the world weighs us down. Amen.

Rev. Don Schweitzer