

The Traditional Jesus

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Luke 2:22-35

I think when most people think about Jesus, they think of him as a revolutionary. Jesus is someone who brought radical change to the world. Jesus is a disruptive force who challenged the status quo and overturned tradition. And you can understand why people say that. There are a lot of stories where Jesus disrupts tradition. After all, didn't Jesus shake up the old order of things? Didn't Jesus tell all sorts of stories challenging the religious authorities of his days: Woe to you scribes! Woe to you Pharisees! Didn't Jesus push against the traditions of his day, especially the Sabbath? Wasn't he always in trouble for violating the Sabbath rules? Didn't Jesus talk about tearing down the temple and rebuilding it? Didn't Jesus talk about his gospel being like new wineskins? Didn't Jesus do all sorts of scandalous things like touching lepers and eating with tax collectors and hanging out with sinners? Jesus is a radical! Shaking up the old order and its traditions. This is certainly part of the truth about Jesus. He is a change agent. He does shake things up. And our passage speaks to that. Simeon prophesies, "*This child will cause the falling and rising of many in Israel!*" Jesus is ushering in a new age.

But there is another side to Jesus. There is a traditional side to Jesus. That's a side of Jesus that people easily miss. We don't miss the disruptive side of Jesus. Those stories jump out at you because they are disruptive. By their very nature traditional things are not new and surprising and so they blend in. So we miss the traditional side of Jesus. But the traditional side of Jesus is there and it's really important. I want you all to see the traditional Jesus this morning, because it's the traditional Jesus who shows up in this passage. How does this story show us Jesus' traditional side? Well, Luke shows us Jesus' family faithfully obeying all the Old Testament rules. As generation upon generation of Israelite has done before them, they go to the temple to fulfill the requirements of the law. It's their second trip. A couple of weeks ago they went to the temple on the 8th day to have Jesus circumcised according to the law (2:21). Today they are going to offer a pair of doves so that Mary can be ritually purified after the birth (as laid out in Leviticus 12.) So in this passage shows us Jesus firmly within the Jewish traditions.

And that's not just something in this passage, throughout his gospel Luke goes out of his way to show how Jesus comes out of the tradition and follows the tradition. Let me try to unpack this tradition theme with a brief Bible trivia time. Questions should be answered quietly in your head, they should not be shouted out, nor should the answers be smugly whispered to your neighbor in an attempt to show what a smarty pants you are. These are hard questions! If you can get three of the seven you are doing well. I asked Bob Grussing these questions and he got 5 and Bob is a learned man. Children, Bob has promised that if you tie or beat his score on this quiz, he will give you candy and tell you that you're awesome. Question 1. Where does Luke's gospel end? Where are the disciples at the end of Luke's gospel? They are in the temple. Luke tells us that after Jesus' ascension they stay continually in the temple glorifying and praising God. Luke ends his gospel in the temple. Question 2. Where does Luke begin his gospel? What's the first story of his book? It's the story of Zechariah sacrificing in the temple. Luke's gospel begins in the temple and ends in the temple. And the temple is the place of the tradition. Question 3: Where is Jesus in the story right after our passage and what is he doing? He is in the temple again, this time as a 12 year old. He's lecturing the teachers of the law, amazing them with his knowledge of the tradition. Question 4. At the end of that story of 12 year old Jesus in the temple, there is a verse that is almost an exact echo of the verse at the end of our passage. It says

this: “*Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man.*” That verse is essentially a quote from another famous Bible story. Do you know which one? It’s Samuel. I Samuel 2:26 says the same thing about Samuel after his mother Hannah leaves him in the temple. You can look it up. It places Jesus in the tradition of Samuel. Question 5. In the story of Transfiguration, the story where Jesus is clothed in white upon the mountaintop, two figures appear with Jesus. Who are they and what do they represent? The two figures are Moses and Elijah and they represent the law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah). Jesus is portrayed as the fulfillment of the tradition. Questions 6. In Luke chapter 4, Jesus visits his hometown on the Sabbath and while there he does something that he does every Sabbath day, something that Luke calls his custom. What is that weekly custom? He visits a synagogue to worship. Jesus observes the tradition of synagogue worship every week. Question 7: In Luke’s second book, the book of Acts, in the days after Pentecost after all those people are converted to Christ, where do the converts get together every day to fellowship? In the temple. Acts 2:46. Again in the places of tradition. This is all from Luke. And it’s only a small part of Jesus connection to tradition. I haven’t even mentioned all the times Luke talks about Jesus’ words and actions being a fulfillment of old Biblical promises. Luke really wants to show us the traditional side of Jesus.

Why does this matter? Why is it important that you understand that Jesus didn’t just radically change everything, but observed old customs and followed old rituals and fulfills the old story? ***It matters because it helps us better understand the speed of things and the feel of things when we follow him.***

We are naturally be attracted to the new and the revolutionary. We will always want the quick fix, the instant result, the radical change. That’s what sells in this world. Advertisers are always selling their stuff by telling us how their thing will work fast, get instant results. They bait us by telling us that it has a revolutionary design, that it is ‘the latest thing.’ I bought my wife an Instant Pot for Christmas. Have you heard of this thing? It’s high tech. It is ‘the latest thing.’ It can cook a three course gourmet meal in approximately 45 seconds. ...Or so I’m told. It’s hard to resist such quick results. It’s hard to resist the new, the fast and the instant. Every diet and exercise plan that you’ve ever seen in any infomercial plays on that same desire. Try our diet pill and you will lose weight fast! I took Hydroxy-cut and I lost 20 pounds in a week. I worked out with the super maxi flex-o-matic and I got six pack abs after only three workouts! You will see results right away! Limited time only! Act now!!!! There are no infomercials for the slow and steady diet. “Try our slow and steady diet. We are offering tried and true suggestions for an old problem. With the slow and steady diet you’ll eat more vegetables and less cake. You drink more water and less sugary soft drinks! You will go for a half-hour walk every day. Change will be so slow you will have trouble noticing it. Expect to see real results in a year...or so.” We love the new, the fast, and the instant. We love them because we know that things in this world are not the way they are supposed to be. We need to change. The world needs to change. We feel that deeply. So deeply that we want those changes to come now now now now now! We want the changes to come yesterday! And so when someone offers us the new, the fast, the instant, we can’t resist.

It’s important that we see the traditional Jesus so that we can understand that following Jesus is not about the new, the fast, and the instant. Yes Jesus brings change to this world. Yes Jesus brings sudden change to this world. When he was born at Bethlehem, when God came into History, everything was suddenly different. When Jesus rose on Easter morning, when the door was blown off the tomb and Jesus walked out, life in the world was changed forever. And that happened in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye. And when Christ returns in glory the change will be sudden as well. But these are special events! These glorious incursions of God’s power into history are not representative of the speed things go and the way things feel when you follow Jesus.

Take Simeon and Anna for example. In some ways this story does represent a glorious moment for them, a sudden change. At long last, they see Jesus! But if you sat them down and talked to them what the life of discipleship felt like to them along the whole road of life, they would not have talked about the new, the fast or the instant. They would have talked about a long obedience in the same direction. They would have talked about years and years of saying daily prayers. They would have talked of years and years of rituals and observances. They would have talked about years and years of coming to the temple and coming to the synagogue. They would have talked of years and years of singing Psalms and reading Isaiah. And a lot of that journey would have seemed slow and frustrating, like nothing was happening, like you were just going through the motions. Think of Anna. Her road has been long and hard! She's 84 years old, she's been a poor widow for as long as she can remember. And yet day after day she practices this long obedience in the same direction. She worships night and day in the temple, fasting and praying. And I am sure that on many of those long nights of fasting and praying there were days where she wondered, Lord, are you ever going to come? Lord, are you even listening? Yes Jesus comes in a flurry of angel's wings at Christmas time. Yes he does these radical disruptive things. These show us his power and his ultimate intention, but the life of discipleship is made up of slower stuff, the saying of old prayers, the reciting of old promises, the telling of old stories, the proclamation of an old Gospel of a savior who will make everything new.

Why is it so important that we see the long obedience of Anna and Simeon and the traditional side of Jesus? Because in the short term life can make no sense at all. I know that for many of you, the last weeks, the last months, the past year have been hard. You have not seen the sudden fulfillment of your hopes and prayers; if anything things have seemed to go in the opposite direction. Things have happened in your family, things have happened in your life that don't seem to bring any fulfillment of God's promises. They just make things harder and more chaotic. If that's your life right now, do you know what this story gently suggests you might do? Keep practicing the same old things. Keep walking the long road of obedience. Keep coming to the temple to pray and sing, keep reciting the old promises, keep gathering with your fellow travelers, keep loving each other as you walk down the road. Remember, it's because Simeon and Anna kept practicing those old ways that they were in a position to see the new thing. It's because Simeon kept coming to the temple, it's because Anna kept fasting and praying in the temple courts for year after year after year after year, that she is there on the day when everything changed.

There are a lot of churches who will offer you some version of sudden change. Come worship with us and you will have a life changing worship experience. Come worship with us and you should expect a miracle. This is not your grandfather's church; we will show you the radical power of Jesus. God bless those churches. God bless any group of people that is honestly trying to follow Jesus. But sometimes I feel like they are offering the spiritual equivalent of a miracle diet pill. They are the church version of Hydroxycut. Here at LaGrave, we offer the spiritual equivalent of the slow and steady diet. We will tell the old story, we will practice the ancient habits of faith, we will recite the ancient creed, remember Psalms, learn old catechisms. A lot of the time change will be imperceptible. But we are on our way to Jerusalem, and even in the midst of our worst trouble we will keep walking, we will keep loving, knowing that one day the trumpet will sound and we will be changed and suddenly, like Simeon, we will see Jesus. Only unlike Simeon I don't think we will not take Jesus in our arms, I think Jesus will probably take us in his.