

Light for All

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

January 7, 2024 PM Sermon

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Luke 2:22-38

Last year LaGrave was blessed to witness 19 baptisms. Lord willing, there are more to come in this new year, including two next Sunday. It's a wonderful experience. We hear the richness of the liturgy. We listen to the parents make their vows, "We do, God helping us", and we respond in like manner as we pledge to support and pray for them. Often the children of the church gather on the steps, up close and personal, to witness the child being sprinkled with water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

What if, while celebrating a baptism, the entire ceremony gets suddenly interrupted by a couple of senior citizens who make their way down the aisle, up the chancel steps, and take the baby away from the parents. As they do, an audible gasp is heard across the congregation.

Even more bizarre, one of them starts babbling far-reaching predictions about who this child will grow up to be. "Did you know that little Brandon John here is going to grow up to be president? Some will love him, but others will hate him. And you parents (as he glances over at the boy's mom and dad), well, you will spend most of your years worrying yourselves sick about him. The elderly gentleman turns, looks back out over the congregation, and announces, "Okay, I've said what I needed to say. You can now go back to baptizing the little guy."

What would we think of such a spectacle? What would our reaction be? Perhaps the same questions could have been asked of Joseph and Mary.

As they come to the temple in Jerusalem with baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph fulfill a religious ritual every bit as familiar to them and the others in the temple as a baptism is to us today. The family is committed to following the Law of Moses as we find it recorded in Exodus 13, that every firstborn male child be brought to the temple to be consecrated to the Lord. In fact, Luke makes this pious commitment abundantly clear because he refers to fulfilling the law five times in this passage.

Joseph and Mary cannot afford to bring a lamb for the required offering, so they bring with them two pigeons (perhaps, as one commentator suggests, that were nailed by Joseph's slingshot just the other day).

It all appears to be a routine occasion as this humble family seeks to fulfill the customary rituals after the birth of their first son, but like our story about the baptism, routine is not the word we would use to describe this event, for the Holy Spirit is on the move.

The third person of the Trinity goes ahead of this simple family and places two particular people in the Temple courts that day, two elderly people who are waiting for the appearance of the Lord's Messiah, and one who has been told by God that he would live long enough to see that day happen.

One of those people is Simeon. Some think he is a priest, but perhaps more likely a layman, a worshiper of God who lives in Jerusalem. He is righteous, a keeper of the law, a man of good character, and one who is fair and honest in dealing with others. He is also devout, a reverent follower of the Lord, one who walks with him and desires to please him in all aspects of his life. As one commentator notes, "Saints in touch with God's heart often wait expectantly for the completion of God's promises." Such is true for Simeon and also for the other person, Anna.

Anna, a woman likely over one hundred years old, has served God faithfully for years through acts of worship, prayer, and fasting. God has called her during her many years as a widow to a full-time ministry of intercession.

The normal events of the liturgy that day are suddenly interrupted when Simeon, this ancient-looking man shuffles up to Mary and Joseph and takes hold of the baby. Takes hold of the baby? We can imagine Mary's reaction to this. Those of you who are parents probably remember what it was like handling your infant children, especially the first-born. You treat her like an eggshell. You're afraid if you hold her the wrong way, she'll break. So Mary must have worried about handing her precious little baby boy over to a doddering old stranger.

Simeon takes Jesus from Mary and places him gently in his arms. As Jesus tugs at and plays with his beard, Simeon begins to praise God with a song that some say is as beautiful as any of the Psalms: Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your

people Israel. Joseph and Mary are amazed and marvel at what Simeon says. He blesses the three of them, but then turns his eyes just to Mary. He looks upon her and says words of prophecy, words that are a bit hard for a mother to hear: “This child will cause many in Israel to fall and others to rise. While he has been sent as a sign from God, many will oppose him. How people respond to him will reveal where their hearts really are with God.”

Anna shows up just as Simeon finishes. She breaks into an anthem of praise to God as she gives thanks for the gift of the Messiah.

While many faithful believers in Israel were looking for the Messiah, very few recognized him because he did not meet their expectations. They were looking for a mighty military and political leader, not one who was born into a peasant family. They were looking for one who would arrive with great fanfare and pageantry, perhaps who rides up on a white stallion and takes the place by storm. They were looking for one who would overthrow the government and defeat Roman oppression. What they were not looking for was one who was born in a manger, almost in secret.

Simeon, however, is different from those people. He is a man filled with the Spirit of God who does not lose his faith in the midst of all this waiting that Israel is doing. We are told that the Holy Spirit was on him (verse 25), that the Holy Spirit revealed things to him (verse 26), and that the Holy Spirit led him where he should go (verse 27). A chance meeting between Simeon and Jesus’ parents at this massive temple complex, some 30+ acres in size? Not at all. “Chance,” of course, is not in God’s vocabulary. This is a miraculous meeting, destined by God, and orchestrated by his Spirit, and it is God’s Spirit that leads Simeon to proclaim the bold things he does.

Remember that Israel, the Jewish people, are waiting for their redemption, for their Messiah, for their hope and their future. But what does Simeon sing? What does he proclaim at what some consider his epiphany moment?

Although likely glazed over by cataracts, the old’s man’s eyes seem to see farther than anyone else’s, for he clearly sees God’s salvation that he has prepared for all nations. And then, perhaps even more shocking, he mentions the Gentiles, the non-Jewish people, before his own people Israel (verse 32). Can you imagine, in the temple that day, what hearers around Simeon must have thought? What? The Messiah is finally here, but salvation is for everyone? The Jews would probably say, with a sneer on their face, “The light has come even for those Gentiles?”

The jaws of those in the temple should not have dropped because God had been dropping hints at the expanse of his kingdom throughout the ages, through the prophets they knew so well, like Isaiah and others (see Isaiah 42:6-7). But for us, our jaws probably should drop, and we should be paying attention as we read those words because salvation for the Gentiles means salvation has come for us, for all of us who are not Jewish.

God has ways, of course, of getting our attention. He does so sometimes through unexpected events, events that can be hard, events that can break our comfortable routines, as was true for Joseph and Mary, when they needed to trust and hand over their baby boy so Simeon could proclaim the wonderful news of the gospel. We see this in events like the Messiah coming in the form of a baby being born in all places but a stable in Bethlehem. We also see this in events that take place in our own lives.

Christian speaker Allen Parr tells this story: “For much of my life I went to church each week. However, I didn’t have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I never prayed. I never read my Bible. I didn’t enjoy church. And as soon as I went to college and got out on my own, I stopped going. Somewhere around the age of 19, I was disciplined by a man who, for the first time, taught me how to study the Bible. From that point on, I couldn’t put it down. I read every book about the Bible I could get my hands on. I listened to every set of tapes and CD series that I could find. I was like a sponge taking it all in. This newfound passion for studying the Bible eventually led to my first opportunity to teach the Bible in 1998. At the time I was working as an engineer and had a very lucrative career for a 22-year old, a career that gave me many comforts in life. However, after two years in corporate America, God challenged me with a question, ‘If money was not your focus, Allen, what would you do with the rest of your life?’ This was the defining moment in my life. It was a wake-up call (we might even call it an epiphany moment). Was I going to choose the comforts my career afforded me or the calling God was placing on my life (which was one of those unexpected moments)?”

The Spirit was on the move in Allen’s life, and he eventually surrendered to the leading of God’s Spirit and enrolled in seminary to begin the journey towards becoming a minister.

Surrender is also evident in the lives of Simeon and Anna. Even well into what we today would call their “retirement” years, God enables them to stay fully committed to ministering in his kingdom (there is no

retirement for them). And then there's Simeon's outlook on his own life. In essence, he is saying, "I will continue to live my life wholeheartedly for you, God, but then I am ready to die whenever you call me home."

The greatest example of surrender, of course, is that of Jesus Christ, who was obedient to death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8), an unexpected event for many. He is the one spoken of in verse 35 of our text, which contains challenging words for Mary. Simeon's prophesy that she will witness her son suffer and die on the cross is a hard pill to swallow, but that event, that ultimate sacrifice, that act of obedience, is good news for those who put their hope in Jesus Christ, for the price for our sins is paid in full because of the shedding of Christ's blood for us.

There are many people in our world, however, who have not heard this good news of salvation. There are people who have not surrendered their lives to Jesus. There are people who are living in darkness because they do not know nor do they care that Christ has paid the price for their sins. Maybe they're your neighbors, your friends, your family members. Maybe they're some of the folks who come to Spa Day here at LaGrave who need an act of kindness. Maybe they're the kids at Congress School who need a Kids Hope mentor. Or maybe they're the prisoners who need someone to encourage them through the Crossroads Prison Ministry.

Friends, light has come for all, and God's Spirit is still on the move doing amazing and unexpected things. May he empower us, as his witnesses, to be in step with the Spirit and to take that light and shine it brightly for him. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen. ©Chad Boorsma