

Title: *Taking Jesus to Church*

Text: Luke 2:21-40

Probably the most heart-warming words that have ever been written are in Luke 2:1-20, the Christmas story. Each of the gospel writers have different emphases that they bring out in relating the birth of Jesus but the one that most people gravitate toward most readily is in Luke's gospel. Matthew tells about some of Joseph's emotions and turmoil over finding out that his betrothed was pregnant. We read about the Magi in Matthew. It's also there we read about the notoriously wicked King Herod and his attempt to wipe out all of the young male babies in Bethlehem and its environs. It drives home the point for us of the stark environment into which Jesus was born and the depths of some people's opposition to Him.

John gives a philosophical/theological prologue which is very meaningful and significant. It contains the wonderful promise that those who receive Him receive the right to be called the Sons of God. It speaks of the glory of God being revealed in Him and receiving grace after grace from the fullness of God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Wonderful promises and very beautiful in their own way but they just don't touch us in the same way and in the same place that Luke's account touches us.

Mark doesn't even give us any of the story surrounding Jesus' birth. He's in such a hurry and so out of breath in giving the story of Jesus' ministry that he just — writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, of course — leaves out the story of Jesus' birth.

When we send Christmas cards and reenact the Christmas story in our churches we usually turn to Luke. We like the child being laid in a manger, being turned away from the inn. The angelic announcements are thrilling and we can relate to the good news being first announced to a group of unclean, impure shepherds. We're left at the end with Mary pondering these things in her heart.

Mary has a lot to ponder. Her child came to her through supernatural means but who's really going to believe that? She's been told that she had found favor with God and that her son would be "great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." Imagine that, Mary, a poor peasant girl as the Queen Mother. The incredible response to her son would be enough to take the breath away from any young mother who's escaped from the rumor mill of her home town, who's had to go to her ancestral home to be taxed and now has had to give birth in a barn. We're left in verse 20 with Mary pondering these things in her heart. What's next for her, though?

As a devout person, she's anxious to fulfill what the law stipulates she should do with her son. Besides, she must have been on a sort of spiritual high contemplating how God was moving in and through her life. It seems the right thing to do, and one that she would do gladly, would be to take the baby Jesus to church. Now lest someone get hyper-literal on me, I know Joseph and Mary took him to the temple and not to the church. They took him to the place of

worship where they met with God on a regular basis. They were anxious that this little baby who would be the fulfillment of the law have the law fulfilled in his life.

Luke provides parentheses which help to set the context for Jesus' life. We get a picture of who his parents are. I mentioned last week that we conservative, evangelical, protestant Baptists are so turned off by what we view as improper veneration of Mary that many times we fail to learn the lessons there are to learn from her life. Mary is the woman that God chose to be the mother of His Son. Joseph was described in Matthew as being a righteous man. He was the kind of man who could get past his own misgivings over raising a son who wasn't his. He was sensitive to the Lord's voice. Even when he was entertaining thoughts of breaking off his engagement with Mary, he was described as a righteous man. He was one who was obedient to the angelic visions that came to him. I ponder that and I say, "Well, if an angel appeared to me, I'd get with the program in a hurry." May I remind you of Zechariah's response, the father of John the Baptist? An angel told him that his wife was going to have a baby and he basically said, "What are you talking about?" Even a priest is sometimes slow to do what God obviously wants him to do.

All of this is to say that these are the people God chose to be the earthly parents of His Son. These are quality folks we're talking about. As devout folks, they would take their child to be circumcised in accordance with the law of Moses on the eighth day. Such a simple act and a simple statement but unpack it just a little bit. One of the central foci of Jesus' ministry would be that God is not bound by the temple. Jesus would be the very fulfillment of what the temple was to represent — the presence of God with His people. Notice Jesus didn't come saying, "I'm here. Don't need the temple anymore." Of course, Jesus was only 8 days old at this time. Even the baby Jesus wasn't doing anything but eating, sleeping, crying, and filling up diapers (or whatever they used back then) but God's instruction to the child's parents did not include blowing off the temple. The one who would make possible a true circumcision of the heart would himself be circumcised on the eighth day.

Notice also that although Jesus' parents were two of the very finest, they were still two sinners who had to go through the process of purification. Although Mary has a place of honor and reverence, she was by no means sinless. Purification involved going to the temple a second time, some 33 days later. There were several different options of what they would be required to sacrifice. The offering they gave was what two poor people would have to pay. It's been said so many times that it's almost cliché, but Jesus wasn't born to the rich and powerful. He was born among the ordinary people. Maybe that's why later they would be the ones who would hear Him so gladly. It is also politically fashionable to say that even Jesus was homeless. Joseph and Mary had a home but they were not, at least not at this time of their life, laden down with the goods of this world. This does show us that Jesus grew up within the milieu of faithful, obedient Judaism.

I often say that I'm not interested in religion, I'm interested in having a relationship with Jesus Christ. I hope you realize that those are not the same things. Mary and Joseph kept the law because it meant for them acts of piety to show their devotion to God. It also signified for them a

desire to raise this child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. It's a mystery to me what did Jesus know and when did he know it? If we believe that He is fully human and fully God, what impact did godly parents have on him? I guess you could say, if Jesus needed the influence of godly, devout parents how much more do our children who are 100% human? My greatest frustration as a pastor centers in what might be my judgmental perception that there are some parents for whom everything else in the world is more important than their children's relationship with Christ.

Mary and Joseph took Jesus up to the temple and when you go to a place where God is, you never know what you're likely to see. I love the church. I often hear people say the church is full of hypocrites and I don't deny that there are some people who have been burned and turned off by negative experiences in church. I would also be remiss if we didn't look at the other side of that coin, though. It is only in the church of Jesus Christ that I have really gotten to know people and walked away and said, "They just don't come any finer than Fred and Mable." If I've met some rascals in church, and I have, I also have met the finest in church.

One person who was as fine as they come, though a bit eccentric in the eyes of some, perhaps was Simeon. We're not given any clue about his age but we assume that he was old because he indicates that he is now ready to die because he has seen God's salvation. We're not told how long Simeon had hung out at the temple, either. I wonder though how many young mothers had become unsettled over the years by this aged Simeon coming up to them and insisting that he get a good look at their baby.

It seems like in the house of God there's room for people that we might consider to find a bit eccentric. Psalm 84 says that even the sparrow has found a home in the dwelling place of God. There are people at church who don't find acceptance and love anywhere else. I've even known people who, in spite of serious mental handicaps, always seemed to know when there was something going on at church. Some people may have thought Simeon was strange.

Luke tells us that he was righteous and devout. He was morally and ethically a good person and carefully observed the law. In spite of the fact that his people were coming out of several hundred years of silence, he was sensitive enough to the moving of God to know that something major was about to happen. He had waited faithfully and expectantly. Every time he saw a blue blanket he probably went running up to take a peek.

This day was different, though. The Holy Spirit had already revealed to him that his waiting would not be in vain. He would see Israel's consolation before he died. The Spirit gave him an irresistible urge to go to the temple courts. When he got there he wasn't disappointed.

One look at the baby Jesus and he knew this was the One he had been waiting for. Simeon knew that he could die now because he had seen that for which he was living. What's left after you've seen Jesus? You can experience some momentous event in your life and feel that there's nothing left for you. Alexander the Great was bored and disillusioned at 33 years of age because there were no worlds left for him to conquer. After a stellar career and back-to-back

Super Bowl victories, John Elway had nothing left to prove in terms of the NFL. After Simeon saw Jesus, there was nothing left for him to live for.

Jesus represents the salvation that had been promised for centuries, first for the Jew but also for the Gentile and for all of the earth. Jesus is the light that all people can see.

Joseph and Mary marveled at the words that were being said about their little boy and at the discernment of Simeon, I'm sure. What comes next is disconcerting to them and to us.

Jesus Christ is King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace. He is the One who is altogether lovely and at Whose feet one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord. It's difficult to imagine that there are some for whom his coming is not good news. It's difficult to believe that he could be a stone of offense to some. Mary knew that implicitly in her *Magnificat*. She understood that the proud would be scattered and that rulers would be brought down from their thrones but Simeon broadens that understanding. Mary's *Magnificat* paints the portrait of justice being meted out to the oppressor; of those we look at needing to "get theirs" getting theirs.

Simeon said, "Mary, this sweet innocent little baby in your arms isn't going to be love by everyone. Those who embrace him will find themselves elevated and those who ignore him or reject him will stumble because of him." Whatever else you may say or think, Jesus Christ brings you to a crisis of decision. The thoughts of our hearts are revealed in the light of what we do with Jesus Christ. If we view ourselves as being self-sufficient, having it together and a good person, we fall because of our incorrect view of our relationship between Jesus Christ and our self. If we come to him in humility and contrition and repentance, and lower ourselves before Him, He will lift us up.

The thought of someone rejecting Jesus to their eternal regret is painful for us. What must it have been for his mother? There's no pain like a mother's pain (or so I'm told.) Certainly she must have bristled at those who continually nit-picked at everything her son did to death. She would know the ultimate agony of watching her son die at the hands of his enemies at a very young age.

As if the encounter with Simeon wasn't enough, there was a holy woman there in that temple who had a direct line to God. I've known saintly old ladies in my day who didn't need the grapevine to tell them who was in need of prayer. It was if God Himself told them who was in crisis and needed special attention. There are several ways of calculating her age. The NIV says she was 84. Other translations word it so that she may have been 103 years old. In any event, she was old by our standards and ancient by the standards of her day. She was in tune with God. She gave all of her life over to serving God, worshiping God and communing with Him in prayer. With her unusual discernment, she was able to speak to all who would listen about this remarkable little baby boy.

What a whirlwind of activity has surrounded Mary and Joseph. If she wrote a Christmas letter to all of her friends what news she would have to tell about the most recent year of her life. Mary and Joseph showed themselves to be devout people. They could have said, "We're Jesus'

parents. He's God's Son. That places us in a special category, but they didn't." They modeled even for Jesus piety and devotion and the grace of God was upon the boy Jesus as he grew.

Fulfillment . . . temple.

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