

THE TIME HAS COME

Luke 2:22-40

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31 December 2017

Endings and beginnings are significant. We have symbols and rituals to mark important events in our lives, to set them aside, as a way of saying, “This is a time that means something.” Think of the traditions that surround marriage. Whether a wedding is simple or elaborate, large or very small, most weddings involve the speaking of certain words, the exchange of rings, the kiss, elements which say to the couple and to the observers, “This is not a day like any other day.” The couple may have been together for years, but still the wedding marks a new reality.

Think of the traditions that surround funerals. The words that are spoken and the people who are gathered pay tribute to a life, testify to a faith. The rituals of goodbye help those who are grieving and they say that this life mattered, this life made an impact on the world.

Tonight some of us will raise a glass, some of us will sing “Auld Lang Syne”, or listen to it sung, some of us will see the clock turn to midnight and the ball drop in Times Square. Even if you do none of that, you will go to bed tonight with an awareness that this year is ending. Tomorrow you may eat pork and sauerkraut, you may put away your Christmas decorations, you may hang a new calendar in the kitchen.

Endings and beginnings are symbolically important. The way we celebrate our endings and beginnings help us understand how to live our ordinary days with more meaning and purpose and joy.

Our story for today is one we can easily miss. When we were here together last Sunday night, we heard the more familiar portion of the second chapter of Luke - we heard of Joseph and Mary traveling to Bethlehem where there was no room in the inn, the birth of Jesus, the shepherds receiving the news, the angels and shepherds visiting the holy family.

There are two more stories about Jesus in the second chapter of Luke, the only stories we have of Jesus' childhood. The second one is perhaps more familiar - in it Jesus is twelve years old, his family visits Jerusalem for the Passover festival, and then begins to walk home when they realize Jesus isn't with them. He is still in the temple, at the feet of the rabbis, soaking up knowledge.

Our story for today is also a temple story. Luke wants us to know that Mary and Joseph are obedient Jews. Five times in our story for today Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were following Jewish law. It was a religious obligation that a family with a new baby visit the temple forty days after the child's birth and Jewish law also required that first-born sons be dedicated to God. These rituals called for animal sacrifice. Specifically, the law asked for the sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon, "except in hardship cases, when two pigeons or doves would suffice." So now we get our second piece of information about Mary and Joseph. Not only are they religious Jews who meticulously observe the law, but they qualify for what was called the poverty clause.

This is Jesus' family. This temple is his second home. He will be nurtured according to Jewish law. He will grow up to know the scriptures inside and out. He will grow up respecting the elders of the synagogue and their traditions.

Two of those elders are in the temple on this day of Jesus' dedication. Like the shepherds who visited the manger, Simeon and Anna recognize that this is no ordinary child. Simeon is a devout old man, filled with the Holy Spirit. He has been assured by the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he sees God's Christ, the Messiah. The Holy Spirit leads him to the temple at the very hour when Jesus is being presented. The scene is a moving one: an old man now ready to die holding a six-week-old baby who is, at long last, the Messiah, the consolation of Israel. As prophesied by Isaiah, this child will be the means of salvation for all people.

The novelist Oscar Hijuelos once described Jesus as "the most wanted child in the history of the world." There is a tenderness in the way aged Simeon, the frailty of his years draped over him, cradles the infant Jesus in his arms. Simeon has waited all his life for this child. Now he can die in peace. But before he hands the baby back to his mother, Simeon says this: "This child will bring truth to light. His life will bring all who encounter him to a crisis of conscience." Simeon speaks a deep and honest word. We don't know what Mary and Joseph were thinking when they heard him speak, but surely it was another occasion for them to "ponder these words in their hearts."

What is it that Jesus' life does for the world? One writer puts it this way. "Anyone who turns on light creates shadows." Following Jesus is a way of life that brings people to blessedness; it is a positive and satisfying journey, but it is also one that involves the carrying of crosses, the shouldering of burdens, the recognition of the pain in our own lives and in the lives of others. It is a journey that brings one closer to God, a journey that means that your life will make a difference in the world, but it is not a

life that is easy. All of these things Simeon says to Mary and Joseph, he sees it all, this old prophet, he sees it as he looks in the eyes of the child who is already the savior. This child saves us all from lives of meaninglessness. But following this savior is not comfortable.

So far Luke chapter two has been a bright tapestry of hopes, inspired songs and prophecy, but already now we have this dark thread.

Also in the temple that day is a woman prophet named Anna. Luke says she lives in the temple area, where she prays and fasts. She too comes on the scene precisely where and when Jesus is being presented. She also affirms the identity of this child as the one who will redeem Jerusalem.

So this is the beginning of Jesus' religious life. That life will shape him, it will give his life its contours. His upbringing in the temple will give him his vocabulary and his values. Here's how our passage ends: "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."

The way we begin is important, and Jesus' life begins in worship. His parents are steeped in their tradition. And he will grow up nurtured by those roots.

I love that it just so happened that we have a baptism today, and by wonderful coincidence, our own baby Jesus is baptized today. Cooper's life is beginning in church, and I know that it will make a difference in his life. It is not an insurance policy or an inoculation. Cooper will face challenges and difficulties, as we all do. But this grounding in the religious tradition of his parents will make a difference. He will grow up

knowing scripture, vocabulary that will give him words of hope and courage. He will grow up having an extended family in this church - others who share his values, people to whom he can ask questions, with whom he can talk about the things that matter.

These spiritual roots will nurture him, and ground him, and he too will grow in wisdom.

Jesus' life began in community. His parents didn't try to raise him alone. They knew that the elders in the faith would provide more than they alone could give. They trusted him to spend time in the synagogue as he grew up. The more we surround ourselves with people who share our values, the more different life stories we hear, the new perspectives we encounter, it all both deepens and broadens our spirituality, giving us more touch points with God.

Most of our lives are lived in ordinary time. Most of our days do not end with a glass of champagne. One of the gifts of our faith and one of the gifts of Christmas is that the sacred and the ordinary have come together. In the story of God choosing to enter the world as a human being, we celebrate that every day can be holy, all ground can be holy ground. The ordinary days may be filled with mundane tasks but we know that we are not alone. We know that God is with us. And when the ordinary is bathed in holy, that is the most beautiful light of all.

As we begin this new year, here in this place that is sacred to us, surrounded by people who walk this faith journey with us, let us take a few moments to reflect on the year that has ended, giving thanks to God for being with us through it all. And let us take a moment to reflect on where we are going in 2018.

When Simeon saw Jesus, he knew that the time had come for God to act in the world in a new way. That time has come for us, as well, a time for us to be open to what God wants for us in this new year. You each were given a half-sheet of paper. On it are the words, “more of” and “less of” - either during the offering today, or perhaps you want to do it tonight or first thing tomorrow morning, I invite you to a new year reflection. What is God calling you to do more of or less of in this sacred moment, as one year turns into the next?

More gratitude, less complaining? More noticing other people’s good qualities, less focusing on the faults of others? Maybe more appreciation of your own gifts and less self-disparaging comments? More reading, less screen time? More exercise, less screen time? More giving, less shopping? More joy, less despair?

The time has come for us to sink our roots deep into this ordinary life that has been made sacred thanks to the entrance of Jesus into this world.