

## **Anna and Simeon**

### **Luke 2:21-40 by Patty Friesen (Dec.27/15)**

Today's scripture brings the Christmas story to a close. Eight days after his birth, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus. Circumcision of the male Jewish child marked his acceptance into the community. The circumcision and naming, gave the child an identity, a declaration of the child's heritage and character: Jesus meaning Saviour. Then forty days after the birth, the mother was to go to the temple for purification. Luke's account of Jesus' birth began First Advent with Gabriel's announcement in the temple to the elderly Elizabeth and Zechariah and now we close the story in the temple with the elderly Anna and Simeon. Mary and Joseph are fulfilling the religious purification laws by bringing Jesus to the temple forty days after his birth with a pair of pigeons to sacrifice as a thanksgiving offering. Luke begins with a pair of pigeons and moves to a pair of prophets named Simeon and Anna. Both of them are devout, like Elizabeth and Zechariah and both have been waiting for a long time to see the Messiah. They were worshipping in the temple, looking for the comfort of Israel from the prophet Isaiah, "Comfort my people Israel that her sins are forgiven and her warfare is over." Guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon saw baby Jesus, he took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Now God you have given me peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all peoples, a light for the Gentiles and glory to your people Israel." Peace occurs 14 times in Luke, where it is both the goal and the result of God's redemptive work. It goes hand in hand with salvation, not only for Israel but for all peoples.

Anna is a prophet in the tradition of female prophets in the Old Testament, Miriam in Exodus, Deborah in Judges, Huldah in 2 Kings and Isaiah's wife in Isaiah 8. Anna evidently married young and was widowed seven years later. The reference to 84 years probably records her age, but may be read as the number of years she had lived as a widow. Her piety in fasting and prayer puts her in the spiritual frame to encounter the Christ child and recognize his significance. She prepares the way for the widows who were the foundation of the early church in their prayer and doing good works.

As Mary and Joseph went about the process of fulfilling the requirements of the Jewish law regarding circumcision of the child and purification of the mother, they received God's blessing through Anna and Simeon. This merits careful reflection among modern Christians. The observance of religious rituals has fallen on hard times. Essential to Judaism is the praise of God in all of life. The Jewish law taught that God was to be honoured in one's rising up and lying down, in going out and coming in, in how one dressed and what one ate. The danger, however, was always that adherence to external requirements could ask a disregard for purity of heart and sincerity in one's love of God and neighbor. Jesus attacked the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and early Christians soon moved to distinguish themselves from Jewish practices.

Ritual observances had a well-established place in Christian devotion in the Middle Ages like daily communion, praying to the saints, pilgrimages and the observances of fasting during Advent and Lent but the Anabaptist Reformation precipitated a separation from the interior aspects of faith from the believers' exterior expressions of that faith. Rightly so, we emphasized the importance of inner conversion and adult baptism rather than the mere adherence to rituals. But as we Anabaptists threw

out the rituals and the art in church to focus on the preached word and behavior of believers, we may have left ourselves ritually and artistically deprived.

Most of us have grown up in very plain churches with no art or colour. Most of us have grown up with communion only twice a year. Our worship has mostly been about preaching and passive listening, the pulpit an elevated, sacred place that only the pastor or bishop could use. Bill Kroeger who grew up in this congregation said that as boys in the old church, they would hide behind the pulpit, until they got caught and spanked for it. Ah, the good old days. Now anyone can get behind the pulpit and we benefit from that. Now we have more colour and art in church and we benefit from that. Now we have communion more often and say the Lord's Prayer more often and we benefit from that.

As modern Christians, we need more religious rituals in our homes and at church. We need to stop and give thanks for the day at meals and at bedtime. We need the marking of both daily and special events with rituals that recognize the sacredness of life and the presence of God in the everyday. Where is God found? The Jewish oral law recognized that God was present wherever the Torah was studied. If two sit together and words of the Law are spoken between them, the Divine Presence rests between them. For Christians, Jesus took the place of the study of Torah: For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them. We meet Jesus anytime we are with family and friends.

The challenge to modern Christians is to find effective rituals for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary. We need to learn to greet the morning with gratitude; to celebrate the goodness of Food, family and friendship at meals; to recognize mystery in

beauty; and to mark rites of passage – like sweet sixteenth birthdays, and the freedom and responsibility that come with new drivers’ licenses. Rituals celebrate all the goodness of life.

Words of blessing are powerful in the context of religious rituals. Commitments are made. Love is given a voice. Promises shape relationships. This is why baptisms and weddings and funerals are so important. They publically give shape to what we believe and what we hope for and what we grow into – not only for those making vows or being remembered but for all of us who participate in them. It is true that we can still love our partners and be committed to them for life without ever walking down the aisle or signing a marriage license. We can believe in Christ in our hearts and be committed to the life of the church without baptism or church membership. It is the inner commitment that is the most important thing after all.

Weddings don’t keep couples together, nor does baptism mean we will be good Christians. But there is something undeniably powerful when we do the rituals and I keep asking couples who live together and then marry – does it make a difference to their relationship to actually have a wedding? High on the party and all the presents – they say yes, having a wedding makes a difference. There is something about the community’s blessing and recognition that changes how we see ourselves. Does baptism and church membership make a difference on how people see themselves in relation to Christ and the church? We’ve been talking about that with recent new members and will keep talking about it in the New Year 😊

The powerful public words spoken to Joseph and Mary are at the center of today’s scripture, obedience to Jewish scripture, celebration of a birth, worship in the Temple and

recognition that God's promises were being fulfilled. The purification ceremony was not a foreign intrusion into their lives but an expression of their deepest awareness and commitments. Mary and Joseph saw God at work in events they had experienced. They lived within a covenant community and they sought to fulfill vows they had made as well as to introduce their son into that covenant community.

Simeon and Anna, whose lives of devotion had made them sensitive to God's presence in the events of their time, responded to Joseph and Mary's obedience by speaking words of blessing. The blessing gave the ceremony means that it would not have had otherwise. Mary and Joseph would remember that blessing the rest of their lives. Each of these elements of ritual and blessing, merit reflection as we search for ways to dramatize our gratitude for the goodness and mystery of life. Let's pray.