

PRESENTED IN THE TEMPLE

Luke 2:21–40

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Baptism of the Lord, January 7, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord,

‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’),

and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord,

‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’*

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

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 favour of God was upon him.

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As we begin this calendar year together at Westminster, I want to give two sermons that are specifically focused on the life of our church. Both sermons are likely to be more *practical* in nature than you often receive from me.

- Today’s sermon is geared to both parents and to the congregation as a whole concerning the role each plays in seeking to rear children and youth in the life of faith.
- Then when I next preach, on January 28, when we ordain and install our officers, I plan to provide the best word I can from the pulpit about how we as a congregation can move into the future in this season of change which has come upon us, as after more than a decade of continuity on the staff, we have been and will be saying goodbye to people who have led us well and are leaving through retirement or changes in call.

But first a sermon for parents and members of the congregation.

I.

As we have seen over the past month, each Gospel writer – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – introduces Jesus Christ in the opening chapters of their respective gospels with ways that reflect the human and theological focus of each gospel writer and at the same time between the four bear witness to the wholeness of the identity of Jesus Christ.

Within this witness, Luke’s Gospel provides the birth story that is warmest and most familiar to us:

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...
While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child...
In that region there were shepherds... keeping watch over their flock by night...
And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host...*

Less familiar to us, but no less beautiful, is what happens after the shepherds and angels depart. Luke writes:

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, [Mary and Joseph] brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.

Once in Jerusalem, they enter the Temple, where they encounter an aging couple – Simeon and Anna – who have been waiting for the Messiah. Luke again makes sure to note that in presenting Jesus in the Temple, they were doing for him “*what was customary under the law.*”

In the midst of Luke’s beautiful narratives of the birth of John the Baptist, the birth of Christ, the response to that birth of angels and shepherds, Luke *four times*¹ specifies that Jesus’ parents have him circumcised, named, and presented at the Temple “according to the Law of Moses,” which is the Torah, the deepest and most specific understanding they have of the will and way of God in the world. They do *by* and *for* their child the very best their faith, their religious tradition, and its teaching offer.

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When I moved here over thirteen years ago, I met with a couple loosely affiliated with the church who have long since moved away. In the course of the conversation they shared with me that they were paying about \$500 a week for a high level of ballet schooling for one of their children. Now at the time I was not that many

¹ Mary and Joseph are depicted as devout and faithful Jews. The four mentions of observance are found in Luke 2:21-24, including the reference in verse 21 to “it was time to circumcise the child.”

years away from having coached T-ball for my son, but that had been in Texas. Even then, I remember then feeling scrunched at having to pay \$90 to sign him up for the team and \$50 for a uniform. When this couple told me the \$500 figure for ballet I quickly did the math and realized they were paying nearly \$25,000 a year for this artistic endeavour. It was one of the early and arresting reminders that I had not only moved from one time zone to another, but from one economy to another.

In the years since, I have come to observe how seriously *parents* in this community and in our congregation seek to expose their children to the myriad of opportunities that come with living in this area: opportunities in sports, scouting, education, science, technology, music, the arts, drama, dance, ballet. I have observed how much time and money and mentoring parents give to rearing their children to be the most educated, civic minded, well rounded, and healthy human beings they can be. Though I had far fewer opportunities as a child to *receive* such exposure, and later as a parent to *provide* such exposure, I know for seeing others in the years since how nearly all of these experiences are of the highest quality and how much children and youth receive from them. I do not begrudge any parent or grandparent doing the very best by their children. It is a wonderful world we live in. It is a wonderful community we live in. The opportunities are almost limitless. And in the Presbyterian tradition, we have a strong affirmation of living in the world God has created and Christ has come to redeem. For our children and youth taste that is consistent with our faith.

But as every adult – parent or not – who comes to this church knows, in order to expose our children to the faith we have, we simply must make a parental choice to involve them in the life of the church – through the what fits their personality – in worship, church school, choir, confirmation, youth fellowship, mission trips. Exposure to the Christian faith through the church is – in my opinion – at least as important as the exposure we rightly choose to give our children to the life of the mind, the life of the body, and the life of the world.

I don't know what choices Mary and Joseph faced in rearing their son.

- Perhaps Joseph taught carpentry on the weekends and Mary had a small pottery studio in their village, but I have my doubts.
- I doubt they faced significant decisions about how much technology to allow Jesus to use, or whether or not to travel to Florida to see spring training.

But when Luke says over and over “according to the custom of the law,” Luke is emphasizing that it was Mary and Joseph – as the earthly parents of Jesus – who chose to bring their son to the Temple. When they made that parental choice for Jesus, they came to see² that it was in the Temple that Jesus came into the purpose for which angels and shepherds and census and manger had been choreographed by God. Just as we know a child will never learn soccer without being put out on the field, a child will be hard pressed to find healthy, balanced, well rounded Christian faith without parents making a choice to involve them in the life of the church. Luke concludes his description of Jesus' birth and childhood by saying what had been said of Samuel³ and John the Baptist⁴ before him: “Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in divine and human favor.”⁵ The choice his parents made played a role in that.

II.

But it wasn't just the parents. There were people at the Temple *waiting* for Jesus.

² See the story of Jesus being “lost” in the Temple in Luke 2:39-52.

³ I Samuel 2:26.

⁴ Luke 1:80.

⁵ This is the phrasing in Luke 2:52. See also Luke 2:40.

- Simeon, to whom the Holy Spirit had revealed that he “would not see death until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah”
- Anna, 84 years old, dwelling in the Temple in her widowhood, worshipping there “with fasting and prayer night and day.”

These two more than senior citizens *waited* for Christ in the Temple, received him when the parents placed him in Simeon’s arms, blessed him, and then, in Simeon’s case, departed this world in peace.

And we think the work of nurturing children is only for parents?

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Like many of us at Westminster, I have not been involved in bringing a child into this world. I adopted my two children when they were twelve and ten, five years after I married their mother. I only lived with my children for a little over ten years, and their biological father was alive and rightly involved. To be honest, of all the things I have done in my life, I feel less successful as a parent than anything else.

I doubt either Simeon or Anna were involved in the beauty of birth either. But *they were* part of the religious organization that shaped Jesus of Nazareth into becoming the person God created him to be. They played a role in helping a child not their own find the destiny God had for him. Those of us who are not currently or have never been parents play that same role at Westminster.

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About twenty-five years ago, when a church I was serving was thinking long and hard about its Christian Education program, so much so that I was losing sleep at night thinking about it, a sentence came to me in the middle of the night that I have held on to ever since:

Whatever a child or young person experiences at church from the time their foot touches the pavement on the church parking lot until they fasten their seat belt to return home forms their faith.

Whatever children and youth experience from hearing, seeing, interacting with adults – in the kitchen, in the hallways, at the water fountain, in the classroom, in the sanctuary, in the choir loft – whatever they experience from *us* shapes their faith, for good or for ill. We are all Simeons and Annas.

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From the time I was eleven years old my family were active members of Germantown Presbyterian Church outside Memphis, Tennessee. At age 86, my mother still goes every Sunday, even on cold days like today. Germantown was a small country church when we joined it that is now almost the size of Westminster and similar to it in many ways.

Along with school and sports, church was a normal part of our family life. We attended each week, and the usher was nearly always a man named Bobby Lanier, who was on the city council and a volunteer fireman and many other things in the community. I don’t know what else. His wife was Catholic; so we never saw her at our Presbyterian Church. His children were grown, and I only knew one of them by his picture in a football uniform in the “Hall of Fame” display case in the school gym. Despite being at our church without his family, Bobby Lanier ushered every Sunday. As child, when along with other children we would burst out the doors as soon as the service was over, we always came to a stop when we arrived at the back of the church where Mr. Lanier,

stood, for we would shake his hand and he would place in our palm a stick of Wrigley's Spearmint Gum, with its white wrapping and thin aluminum foil. Every Sunday of the year.

With due apologies to any dentists or hygienists who may be present today, when I was in my final year of seminary, 24/25 years old, I went back to the church to preach one Sunday. Some of the members were the same, but some were new. Some had passed away. All had aged. But Bobby Lanier was still ushering.

I gave the sermon, walked down the center aisle during the final hymn, gave the benediction from the back (as was their custom), then turned to stand at the door and greet people. Bobby Lanier patted me on the shoulder, shook my hand, and placed in my palm a stick of Wrigley's spearmint gum.

*Whatever a child or young person
Experiences at church
From the time their foot touches the pavement
On the church parking lot
Until they fasten their seat belt to return home
Forms their faith.*

*We are all Simeons and Annas.
Amen.*