

Scripture Comments

Luke 2.22-40

January 1, 2012

The baby.

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On the first two Sundays of Advent, the Gospel lectionary readings were from Mark. In my first comments for this year, I introduced Mark as the Gospel for the year. Since the second Sunday of Advent, the readings have been from Luke and John. We will eventually return to Mark, but it will be after Epiphany. Today we look at the story from Luke that we usually refer to as the “dedication.” The story comes with providential timing. The celebration of Christmas has past. We have stuffed ourselves with Christmas goodies. We need to return to our usual diet. The shepherds and the angels have returned to their homes. Mary and Joseph have a son to raise, religious obligations to keep and a return trip to Nazareth. It reminds me of what many of us experience post-Christmas.

The author of Luke might have had four purposes in mind when this story was constructed. If the author did not, I can find them in the story. First, even in infancy, Jesus’ life is characterized as being in full observance of the Law of Moses. In the reading for today, this fact is stated five times (vv. 22, 23, 24, 27, 39). The obedience is found in the rite of circumcision, which is combined with the naming of the baby according to the previous instruction from the angel. We also see obedience in the dedication of the firstborn to God (Ex. 13.1-2) and the purification of the mother (Lev. 12.6). There is a subtle reference to the economic status of the family that most of us miss. Normally a sheep was sacrificed for the mother’s purification, but because Mary could not afford a sheep, she was allowed to make a less expensive sacrifice (Lev. 12.8). There is a previous story of a mother dedicating her son to God found in 1 Samuel 1-2. Some commentators believe that Luke misunderstood the dedication and cleansing ritual. Others suggest that Luke intentionally combines these two rituals. The question arises because of the line, “their purification” (Luke 2.22).

The second purpose is the declaration of the child’s greatness. At birth the declaration was by an angel, at age twelve by the teachers of the law (2.46-47), and at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry by the voice from heaven (3.22). In the story for today the proclamation is by two aged, pious Jews, Simeon and Anna; both are waiting for God’s intervention and the salvation of Israel. Simeon was inspired by the Holy Spirit (vv. 25-27) to recognize the infant Jesus as the fulfillment of his hope. Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel (Isa. 40.1). But Simeon also foresaw that Jesus would be the center of controversy, the occasion for the fall and rise of many in Israel (Isa. 28.16), and a cause of piercing grief for his mother (vv. 34-35).

Anna, the prophetess, was a widow, either for eighty-four years or was eighty-four years old (the Greek is not clear on this point). The role of righteous widows was well established in the history of Israel (see the stories of Naomi and Judith). In the early church, the role of these faithful women was to pray night and day (1 Timothy 5.3-10). Perhaps the author, Luke, is telling his readers (Israel) that when led by the Holy Spirit -- righteous, and devoted to prayer and fasting – you can see in Jesus the fulfillment of your longing.

This story is “bracketed” by Simeon and Anna. Luke repetitiously refers to Simeon as “a man in Jerusalem,” when that fact would be known from verse 22. The story of Anna ends with the reference to the “redemption of Jerusalem.” What we discover is that Jerusalem and the Temple play significant roles in the overall story from the annunciation to Zechariah (1.8-20) to Paul’s arrest in Acts 21.13. Even when the people of Jerusalem become the objects of Luke’s sharp attacks, Jerusalem and the Temple remain important locations of God’s action and the life of the community.

The third purpose of the story is to return the Holy Family and the action of the narrative to Galilee and Nazareth. In a few chapters, Luke will present Jesus announcing the nature and purposes of his ministry in a synagogue in Nazareth, “where he has been brought up” (4.16). For now, and for the next twelve years, Luke will end this piece of the story by saying that “the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him” (2.40).

The fourth and final purpose is to introduce another Christian hymn, the *Nunc Dimittis*. This hymn that has become a standard in the Church consists of phrases and lines from the Hebrew Scriptures, mostly Isaiah 49 and 52. The song speaks of the fading of the old before the new, the realization of hope, and God’s final embrace of all peoples, Jews and Gentiles.

The story of Luke-Acts reveals that neither all of Israel nor all of the Gentiles agreed with Simeon’s assessment of Jesus. Many in Israel saw in Jesus anything but salvation. Does that make Simeon’s oracle false? Luke 2.34-35 suggests that the answer is no. If Jesus is God’s salvation “in the presence of the peoples,” nevertheless, Jesus creates division. Up to this point in the storytelling, Luke has portrayed themes of joy and triumph. Jesus is to inherit the throne of David (1.32), he comes as the fulfillment of God’s promise (1.55), he is the Savior (2.11), he is glory for Israel (2.32). Now, for the first time, the relentless themes of rejection and resistance appear. Jesus will prompt division. Many will oppose him. These themes do not wait for his infancy to come to an end.

References:

Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa and James D. Newsome, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year B*; 1993.

Fred B. Craddock, John H. Hayes, Carl R. Holladay and Gene M. Tucker, *Preaching through the Christian Year: Year B, A Comprehensive Commentary on the Lectionary*; 1993.