

*Luke 2:21–40 (Common English Bible)*

<sup>21</sup> When eight days had passed [after Jesus' birth], Jesus' parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus. This was the name given to him by the angel before he was conceived. <sup>22</sup> When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (<sup>23</sup> It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") <sup>24</sup> They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

<sup>25</sup> A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup> The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. <sup>27</sup> Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. <sup>28</sup> Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said,

<sup>29</sup> "Now, master, let your servant go in  
peace according to your word,  
<sup>30</sup> because my eyes have seen your salvation.  
<sup>31</sup> You prepared this salvation in the  
presence of all peoples.  
<sup>32</sup> It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and a glory for your people Israel."

<sup>33</sup> His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who belonged to the tribe of Asher. She was very old. After she married, she lived with her husband for seven years. <sup>37</sup> She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Jesus as a child in Nazareth

<sup>39</sup> When Mary and Joseph had completed everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to their hometown, Nazareth in Galilee. <sup>40</sup> The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him.

*Christmas is a season of waiting. The younger we are, the longer the waiting seems to last. But Simeon and Anna have been waiting too – for their entire lives.  
Now, their Christmas has come.*

*Waiting and expecting*

Simeon is old. He is righteous and devout, and pretty much just waiting to die. But he wants to live long enough to see the salvation of Israel. Simeon knew that things were not right. He needed only to look up at the Roman soldiers standing atop the Antonia Fortress to be reminded, for the fortress sat adjacent to the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. Israel had suffered for so long. But now, the Holy Spirit assures Simeon that he will live to see the realization of his hope.

One day, on what must have felt a bit like an impulse, Simeon went to the temple. There, he saw a young woman, a girl really, with her husband. They were carrying a newborn into the temple to be consecrated. As soon as Simeon laid eyes on the child, he knew that he could die in peace, exclaiming, "because my eyes have seen your salvation." Simeon was not

speaking of his personal salvation. Salvation for the Jews had nothing to do with “getting to heaven” or any other path to personal redemption.

Instead, the salvation for which Simeon had been waiting was the salvation of Israel and, hence, the world. The child, this Messiah-child, would be the fulfillment of God’s promise that Israel would be redeemed from sin and restored to a right relationship with God. In other words, God had made a covenant with Israel and that covenant would be kept by the baby in Mary’s arms. And as had been promised to Abraham two millennia before (Genesis 12), all the world would be blessed through Israel. The baby was to be a light to the Gentiles every bit as much as to the Jews.

Despite the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph were astounded by the appearance of this old man and what he had to say. But Simeon went on. The baby would create turmoil not peace. Many would speak against him. Jesus would reveal what is really

#### Redemption and Purification<sup>1</sup>

Jewish Law prescribed certain rituals after childbirth. First, all male infants were circumcised on the eighth day after birth (verse 21).

Second, as a reminder of the Exodus (when the firstborn of Egypt died and the Israelites were redeemed out of their slavery), the first child born to a couple was consecrated to the Lord’s service. Then, the infant would be redeemed (bought back) at a price of five shekels. Luke notes Jesus’ consecration (verse 22 and 23) but makes no mention of Jesus’ redemption ritual. Perhaps Luke didn’t know all the specifics of Jewish Law and custom. Or, perhaps Luke wants to make the point that Jesus remained consecrated to the Lord, that his parents never redeemed him from the Lord’s service.

Purification of the mother was a third ritual. After the birth of a male child, the mother was ceremonially unclean for seven days and then went through a 33 day purification period. This period was twice as long for mothers of female infants. (Don’t ask me why!) While she was ritually unclean the mother could not enter the temple nor touch any holy object. After the 40 (or 80) days the mother was to offer to the Lord a lamb and either a pigeon or a turtledove. If the mother could not afford a lamb, she could instead offer two turtledoves or pigeons. Mary can offer only the two birds (verse 24), illustrating something of Mary’s family economic situation.

Simeon and Anna encounter the infant Jesus when Mary brings him to the temple for his consecration (verse 27).

<sup>1</sup>This is drawn from R. Alan Culpepper’s commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*. This twelve volume commentary set is in the St. Andrew library thanks to a generous donation.

in people’s hearts, which is, of course, often not very pretty. And, in a statement that surely cut to Mary’s heart, Simeon saw suffering ahead, saying to the new mother, “A sword will pierce your own soul as well.” It might be all angels and adoration now, but the coming of God’s kingdom would exact a high price, not only from Jesus, but from his mother also.

#### *Speaking for God*

As Mary and Joseph tried to make sense of what Simeon had said to them, they were approached by an old woman. Anna was eighty-four and had been a widow for about as long as she could remember. Anna had the gift of speaking God’s word to the people of God. She was one of God’s prophets and never left the temple mount.

Anna is overcome at the sight of the child. Like Simeon, she understands the meaning of this infant. Anna gives thanks to God and then uses her God-given gift to proclaim this Good News to everyone in the temple who looked forward to the salvation of Israel – which meant everyone who could hear her, or nearly so. In Israel at the time, perhaps the only Jews who did not anxiously await Israel’s redemption were those who had made their bed with the Romans, such as the Sadducees and other people of means who were doing quite well under Roman rule.

#### *Doing what is required to see*

Throughout the beginning to his Gospel, Luke has gone to great pains to show us that Jesus and his family carefully and lovingly observed the Jewish Law. This is particularly interesting in that Luke is the only NT writer who is not Jewish. You can’t really see this in the English translations, but Luke’s opening is even written in the style of the Old Testament.

Many Christians get the idea that Jesus came to oppose the Law and toss it out. But this is

a misguided reading of Scripture. Jesus was not only the hope and consolation of Israel, he came to fulfill the Law.

Thus, Mary and Joseph, in their devotion to God and God's teachings, ensure that the infant Jesus is rightly received into the people of God, taking them right into the surprising and even disturbing encounters with Simeon and Anna.

In God's temple, Simeon and Anna both see the infant and, in this, they also see the future. They see the realization of long-harbored hope, even while Roman rule of the Jews continues. In a way, by the power of the Holy Spirit, their vantage point is much like God's.

While we are still in our Christmas glow, perhaps we should check our own vantage point, our own vision. In the midst of the current economic difficulties do we really "see" the promise of the Christ-child, just as Simeon and Anna did?

### Reading "All" of the Bible

We live in a world of sound-bites. Television news rarely gives us more than a five-second comment from newsmakers. The 60-second commercial is an historical artifact. All this makes us even more prone than our predecessors to read the Bible as little more than a collection of inspiring or informational snippets. Countless books at the Christian bookstore have done exactly that with the Bible. But such an approach to the Bible can lead us down some damaging paths.

As we start a new year, a good resolution would be to become a better reader of Scripture; not only to spend more time with the Bible, but to make a conscious effort to read it well.

Reading the Bible means guarding against chopping it up into ever smaller pieces or ignoring the portions that make us uncomfortable.

Every phrase in the Bible needs to be read as part of a sentence; each sentence as part of a paragraph, and each paragraph as part of a larger story or other literary unit. Each story needs to be read in the context of the larger book and each book as part of the entire Bible (or canon). I think you get my point. For example, yes, the Bible says "an eye for an eye." But it also says "turn the other cheek" and "forgive seventy times seven." When we turn to the Bible seeking guidance on dealing with our enemies, or homosexuality, or money, or alcohol, or problems in the workplace, or any other topic of the day, we need to resist grabbing a brief phrase from Scripture, holding it up as God's single pronouncement from the Bible. The truth is that we can find something in the Bible that would seem to support any belief we might hold or any action we might take. As United Methodists, we read the Bible as part of the believing community, aided by biblical scholarship and personal insights. We understand that there are better and poorer ways to interpret the Bible. Using the *entire* Bible, not just our favorite bits, is an essential part of reading Scripture responsibly.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Today's Scripture passage is a good occasion to reflect on the place of ritual in the Church. Christians are all over the place on this. Many Pentecostals and Baptists have stripped virtually all ritual out of their churches. Many Roman Catholics and Orthodox, on the other hand, embrace rituals and liturgies which have been part of their churches for centuries.

What is the place of ritual observance in your own Christian life? Prayer before meals is an example of a ritual practiced each day by some Christians. Do you think of it as a ritual? Why or why not? What are some other examples? Alan Culpepper writes, "Essential to Judaism is the praise of God in all of life. The Jewish Law taught that God was to be honored in one's rising up and lying down, in going out and coming in, in how one dressed and how one ate." The trouble was that such "requirements" could hide a darkened heart. Hypocrisy on the part of some, though, does not diminish the value of the practice.

Culpepper goes on to say, "We meet Christ in the ordinary experiences of life. . . . The challenge to modern Christians, therefore, is to find effective rituals for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary." How can we do this? Should we? What are some rituals we could practice that would celebrate the goodness of God and of life?

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<b>Monday, Leviticus 12</b> The rituals of purification after childbirth	<b>Tuesday, Exodus 13:2, 11-16</b> Consecration of the first-born
<b>Wednesday, Luke 2:39-40</b> Jesus' family returns to Nazareth and Jesus grows older	<b>Thursday, Luke 2:41-52</b> The only story of Jesus from the almost thirty years between his birth and the beginning of his public ministry.
<b>Friday, Luke 3:1-18</b> Jesus' cousin, John, proclaims the Messiah's arrival.	<b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b>

### **Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes**

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

#### **Monday Evening Class - now studying Romans**

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

**This class will not meet on Dec 23 and 30**

#### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class - now studying Exodus**

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

**This class will not meet on Dec 24 and 31**

### **Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall**

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

***The Battle for Christmas:***

***The Real Story of Christmas in America***

**This class will not meet on Dec 29**

**Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.**

### Sermon Notes

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