

*Luke 2:21–40 (Common English Bible)*

<sup>21</sup> When eight days had passed, 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.

<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.

*There's so much to look at during Christmas. Lights, trees, cookies, smiling children.  
But what should we see before we lay our eyes on anything else?*

#### *Waiting and expecting*

Simeon was old. He was righteous, devout, and pretty much waiting to die. But he wanted 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 had assured Simeon that he would 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, and exclaimed, “For 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 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.

### *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.

Anna too 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. 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.

### 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 first born 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).

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 commentary set is in the St. Andrew library.

### *Seeing with clear eyes*

Despite their age, Anna and Simeon see the child in Mary's arms with clear eyes. They see the truth and are delighted by it. They see the arrival of Israel's rescue in this tiny newly born infant. They see . . . and believe.

You and I, and Luke's readers, cannot see the Christ-child as did Simeon and Anna. We are called to believe, to have faith in, that which we cannot see. But there is more to knowing than seeing, or hearing, or tasting, or touching, or smelling. God's cosmos is larger and more mysterious than that. The baby in Mary's arms is larger and more mysterious still, the one in whom "all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible . . ." (Colossians 1:16), the one who would be "wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5), the one whom "every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of the God the Father" (Philippians 2:11).

Can we see the truth of Christmas? Will we tell others this Good News?

### Epiphany and the Wise Men

Next Sunday will be Epiphany Sunday. Traditionally, Epiphany is celebrated on January 6, the twelfth day of Christmas. The day focuses on the story of the wise men, all of whom were gentiles, and celebrates their worship of the Christ-child. In this, they represent the entire Gentile (non-Jewish) world, to whom the God's son has now been revealed. An "epiphany" is a revealing, or even the appearance or manifestation of a divine bearing. Here is a bit more on the magi.

The story is told in Matthew 2:1-12. "Wise men" in v.1 translates the Greek word, *magoi*, which literally means magicians. But these men were neither doers of tricks nor kings. Matthew never even says there were three. Because they came from the east, probably Babylonia, they were most likely astronomers and astrologers, readers of stars. Though they worked without telescopes, Babylonian astronomers were quite sophisticated in their understanding of the stars and planetary movement. Further, they believed that certain astronomical phenomena were signs of new kings, falling emperors, and other important events.

Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the star of Bethlehem – was it some sort of super-nova? An unusually bright star or planet? A conjunction of planets? Whatever it actually was, these magi saw in the "star" a sign that something incredibly important was happening – a king had been born – and they traveled westward in search of the answer.

Sometime after Jesus was born, the magi arrive in Jerusalem, asking about this new king. King Herod hears about this and is frightened – after all, he is already King of the Jews, at least in the eyes of the Romans. Herod, and the rest of Jerusalem, know full well what is going on.

And now, Herod fears that a challenger to Herod's throne has been born and the wise men's journey lends immediate credibility to his claims. Herod responds as we might expect. He hatches a plan to eliminate the challenger. He first finds out when this child was born and then sends the wise men to find the child using the pretext that Herod would like to honor the child. The "wise" men seem pretty naïve, but they turn out to be truly wise.

Upon their arrival in Bethlehem, the magi are filled with joy, for they realize that they have found what they were looking for – the true king. They then proceed to do what we all must do when faced with the reality of Jesus; they fall on their knees in homage, offering the finest gifts that they could imagine. They are warned in a dream to avoid Herod and so they head home. In the verses that follow, we learn that Herod is enraged by the premature departure of the magi and orders the death of all infants younger than two years old in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Herod is determined to eliminate the threat, but an angel has warned Joseph who has fled to Egypt with his young family.

## 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 liturgy 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.

### *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, Jeremiah 23:1-8</b> A message of the restoration of Israel	<b>Tuesday, Isaiah 53</b> The suffering servant of the Lord
<b>Wednesday, John 1:1-34</b> The prologues to the gospel and the testimony of John the Baptizer	<b>Thursday, Colossians 1:15-20</b> The supremacy of Christ
<b>Friday, 1 Peter 2:1-10</b> Like newborn infants, we are to long for spiritual nourishment, for we are God's own people.	<b>Weekly Joys and 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 Matthew's Gospel**

**We will begin the book of Jonah on January 11**

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

**Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Acts**

**We will begin a study of Philippians on January 12**

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

These classes will not meet the weeks of Dec 27 and Jan 3

### **Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall**

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

This class will not meet on December 27

Beginning January 10, a new series:

*The History of Heaven*