

Luke 2:22-40 Anna and Simeon

The Gospel of Luke not only gives the only recorded event of the childhood of Jesus; his visit to the Temple in Jerusalem at Passover when he was 12 years old; but also the time when his parents presented him for circumcision on his 8th day. Circumcisions were common and should not be considered remarkable.

What is remarkable is the encounter Mary and Joseph experienced with two “mature” people when they came to the Temple for the ceremony. The first encounter was with a man named Simeon who uttered a line that has its own Latin title to go with it. The “Nunc dimittis” is a prayer that begins, “now dismiss your servant in peace,” which in some traditions is used as a benediction to a worship service. It goes on, “for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people; a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and a glory to your people Israel.”

He told Mary and Joseph that their child would cause the falling and rising of many people in Israel. He said the child would be a sign to be spoken against; that the thoughts of many hearts would be revealed; he said that a sword would pierce their own hearts too.

The second encounter was with a woman named Anna, who was a prophetess. And in one of the few

specific New Testament references to the larger nation of Israel; she is said to have been the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, proving that there may still have been some in Israel who identified with their old tribal heritage. She just went on about Jesus, giving thanks and encouraging people who awaited the redemption of Israel.

Encounters

The two encounters would not have meant anything to Jesus at the time, but they surely meant a great deal to his parents, even though it would be decades before anything happened to show that Simeon and Anna were anything more than simply a couple of sweet older people who liked to say nice things to babies.

I have a vague memory of such an event in my own life. In the church where I grew up, the altar call at the end of the service was given a great deal more emphasis than we give to ours, and very often there were people who responded by coming forward as the congregation sang, to make professions of faith, or to join the church, or submit to a call to Christian ministry, or to pray. Whenever someone was baptized or joined the church, the minister would invite them into a receiving line at the conclusion of the service, right in front of the sanctuary; and everyone would file by to introduce themselves and offer a welcome.

On one such occasion when I was very young, maybe about 5 years old, my mom and I went through the line, and at the end was the minister's wife, Eloise Forderhase, who was very near to retirement age so to me she was grandmotherly. When we came through the line she spoke to us, looking at me she said to my mom, "He is going to grow up to be a preacher." I thought, "that is what *you* think."

Thankfully, she didn't say anything say about the rising or falling of many or the redemption of anything, or about sword's piercing anyone's soul; but for some reason that I am at a loss to explain, I have been unable to forget it. It turned out to be true and one wonders how she knew.

The text here says that Simeon was moved by the Spirit. It was not just that he knew he wouldn't die until he had seen the Messiah, but that he was somehow guided through that expansive Temple courtyard on that particular day until he met that young couple and their child, when he did he took the baby into his arms and blessed him.

Yogi Berra

I am thinking of Yogi Berra, strangely enough, one of my native hometown heroes who was famous for

saying nonsensical things that often communicated simple wisdom; "if you come to a fork in the road, take it. It is never over, until it is over. That nickel is not worth a dime," and more recently in a famous AFLAC commercial with the duck, "and they give you cash, which is almost just as good as money," a line I am sure someone wrote for him.

I can almost hear him say about these kind of experiences we have read about today, when the mature encounter the very young and offer them blessings, "It doesn't mean anything, unless it does," which I am pretty sure he never said (he once quipped, "I never said half the things I said). But it reminds me of him anyway. These things don't mean anything unless they do. What made my experience meaningful *is* that I became a minister and preach regularly; and that somehow I remember that moment in time when maybe under the movement of something like the Spirit, the minister's wife at my church told me what I would become when I grew up and she turned out to be right.

Hindsight

Sometimes it takes a lifetime to see the way our lives line up for us, the way our paths have been directed even though at the time we were unaware. It is good when we can see the way we have been guided,

because sometimes in the present moment it is not easy to see where we are going and it helps a great deal to remember back as we trust forward, and to be assured of God's providential guidance and care. But there is a little more than just a boost to our faith here. The example of Simeon and Anna speaks to us of an undaunted faithfulness against the evidence that gives light and meaning to whatever darkness we find ourselves in.

The two of them had devoted themselves to the hope of Israel's "consolation" which means that when they looked out and saw the pain of being conquered and the oppression that accompanies it, they never gave up even when all hope was lost.

A Light and a Glory

Time has passed and things have changed. Modernity has happened and the Roman Empire has long since passed away. The world has seen an explosion of technology and information that would strain their credulity and boggle their minds. It is all very unsettling because change is always hard and not always good. Among the changes is that it is no longer possible to think in terms of the redemption or consolation of one nation anywhere, either big or small, without also the redemption of all the other nations. If there is anything that is clear, it is that the whole world stands in need of

consolation and redemption. The redemption we await is bigger than we think.

We too look out and see pain and oppression. For all the changes, the basic situation hasn't changed. We were all given our lives. We are now rather than some other time, here rather than some other place, and we do not control many of the crucial circumstances of our lives. We have been given this imperfect world to live in, and then, after a short time, we all will die. And yet we are responsible for our lives and we all fail to live up to the gift. Along the way we search and struggle for meaning.

Because of Jesus, the light of revelation shines. Forgiveness and resurrection and meaning are given. We can live out lives of undaunted devotion until the Day comes, and refrain from judgment as we have been instructed, and give praise when we see that God still calls people to serve. And never give up even when hope is lost.

Between the people who fear WWII and those who see a great ecological disaster and those who believe in some other world-ending catastrophe, there are people enough who have a pessimistic view of the future and the temptation, given some of the world's problems, is to agree with them and become

discouraged. They despair of the redemption of the world.

Let us hope for it, and be encouraged by Anna and Simeon and their example of faithfulness which was rewarded when they were convinced by the sight of this one child that the salvation they awaited had come at last and that it turned out to be bigger than they imagined, than even we can imagine.

And like them, we will see enough to have peace and gratitude and joy.

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