

January 1, 2017

First Sunday after Christmas Day

And Baby Jesus Was Enough

Annette Hill Briggs

Luke 2:21-38

[Jesus Is Named]

²¹ 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.

[Jesus Is Presented in the Temple]

²² 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 ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ 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, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;*

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³ And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

³⁴ 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 ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶ 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 seven years after her marriage,

³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ 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.

Years ago I went to the hospital to see a new mom and her baby son. I asked how the three-year-old sister's first visit with her brother had gone. "She's not happy," the mama said; "she took one look at him and said, *'That's not a brother. That's a baby!'*" It's a fair opinion. If you're expecting a playmate, a newborn is kind of disappointing.

When Jesus showed up at the Temple in Jerusalem – the Ground Zero of Judaism – among people who had been waiting and watching and hoping and praying for him to come to them for a thousand years, not a soul recognized him. Because they were waiting and watching and hoping and praying for a Messiah. But HE was just a baby. And compared to a Messiah – a SAVIOR – a baby was ridiculous. Absurd really. Far, far more disappointing than getting a newborn instead of a brother.

The Messiah would be sent from God to Israel. The Messiah would fix everything that was wrong and sad and broken in Israel. The Messiah would finally put an end to all the suffering and grief and disappointment. For the nation, the Messiah would make sure Israel was no longer the world's doormat. For regular folks, the Messiah would fix broken families... and broken hearts.

What can a baby do? Burp. Cry. Sleep. Eat. Need a new diaper.

So it's no wonder that not a soul in the Temple that day recognized him – except for Simeon and Anna, about whom Fred Craddock wrote, "These two aged saints are Israel in miniature and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the Temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises." (*Luke: Interpretation*, p. 40)

Luke says that Simeon was as righteous as they come, that Anna was somewhere between 84 and 104 years old. (The Greek is tricky.) I like thinking that a solid sixty or seventy or eighty years of prayer and worship had formed in them the faith of a mustard seed that Jesus will talk about thirty years later – faith so distilled, they didn't need the full-grown, risen-from-the-grave Messiah. *Just a sweet little, 7-pound-6-ounce newborn. Doesn't even know a word yet; just a little infant; so cuddly but still omnipotent. Baby Jesus was exactly enough – just that much of Jesus.* They probably spent less than an hour with him. They heard no parables, saw no miracles, no cross, no resurrection mystery.

And yet, for Luke, Simeon's response is THE high point of the infancy narrative. "*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.*"

His is the faith I wish for. Simeon's. Who, from the midst of a world riddled with disappointment, isn't sad or hopeless at all. "*Messiah*," which had been nothing but a spoken promise for a thousand years, has finally drawn breath. But that's all.

But it was also enough... *for him to die in peace*, Simeon said. But also, for him to live with courage. How do I know he's brave? This sermon. A single line of this sermon actually. In the Temple – Judaism's Ground Zero, remember – the first official Jewish words spoken over Jesus in the gospel include this line: "*A light for revelation to the Gentiles*." Maybe they'd been there so long nobody paid much attention to Simeon and Anna. Or maybe nobody heard him say it. But these are offensive words to Jewish ears, friends. What happened when Jesus talked like this in a country synagogue thirty years later? Those folks tried to kill him, remember? Simeon knew what he was doing.

What was he doing, by the way? He was reading their own Bible back to them. Which you wouldn't think would count as brave, but it did. And does. So it's probably no coincidence that Simeon says these amazingly brave words in the same breath as saying he's perfectly ready to die in peace.

We're going to move through the gospel of Luke for several weeks into the spring. I'd like you, on your own time, to re-read the infancy narrative one more time. And notice how the speeches of Zechariah, Mary, Simeon, and Anna function as footers for Luke's gospel. They are poured deep into the Old Testament – and then covered. They aren't repeated except in glimpses, like Jesus' sermon at Nazareth. But on them, just like on a building, the whole gospel stands. If we don't notice them now, we won't remember them as we move through.

Why does it matter? For two reasons, I think. Well, for one thing – and in this case – for remembering that the gospel did not go to the Gentiles as an afterthought or consolation prize to apostles who lost their first round in the synagogue. Nor was it the idea of the crazy Apostle named Paul in the book of Acts, but a fulfillment of ancient scripture, ancient *Jewish* scripture, found all the way back in the original call of Abraham to go and found a people who would one day be a light to the nations.

And then, there is this Spirit-given human experience of complete contentment in the midst of suffering. Nothing about life in Israel changed the day Baby Jesus was carried into the Temple. Rome was still in charge, and still oppressive. Poor people were still poor. Sick people were still sick.

It was a sweet day, no doubt – but not dramatic and definitely not the stuff of *consolation* and *redemption*, the Messianic language Simeon and Anna use. Which, if I took another thirty minutes, I could go on and on about: how it hooks into the return of exiles to Israel in Isaiah; and the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, that would have been fresh trauma for the first readers of this gospel; how these lyrics would have burned with political reference for them.

And yet, Simeon and Anna sound as satisfied as if they'd seen him rise from the grave. Luke reminds the church of what's always been true: Jesus has come; he is present; his presence is salvific to all who recognize him. Luke reminds us that salvation is as real and true and dependable a reality as the suffering, crazy one we wake up to every morning and that the promises of God are as good and as real as the content of the promises. Not only are both true. They are one and the same.

And the difference in a single human life – between believing it and NOT believing it – is unreckonable, I should think. It's the difference between grayscale and color; between daylight and darkness; between perpetual disappointment and gratitude; between fear and contentment. *That* – JUST knowing who Jesus is and what he WILL do – is enough for Anna and Simeon to live their last days in peace.

And friends, for us, He's already done it. Absolutely everything we need of Christ. He has already done it. We've only to choose to believe it, with all our hearts, with all our minds, with all our lives, and in our life together.