

BaptistWay: Christmas - When faith becomes sight

December 4, 2015

• *The BaptistWay bonus lesson that can be used for Christmas focuses on Luke 2:21-38.*

This lesson is not part of a continual study of the book of Matthew. Instead, it is occasioned by the arrival of Christmas, the celebration of the coming of the Christ child. We should remember that for much of church history, the Incarnation of our Lord held prime significance. Indeed, at Christmas, we find a picture of salvation in Jesus Christ—humanity joined to God in the Word made flesh.

Sometimes, a present neglect of Christ's incarnation makes it difficult for us to find much to say about it. This Christmas lesson, with its focus on Luke 2:21-38, provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the birth of Christ for ourselves personally and for the church across space and time.

Following the precepts of the Law

This passage opens after the birth of Jesus. Luke's Gospel provides most of the familiar nativity details—the overcrowded inn, the hospitality of the stable and its livestock residents, the angelic choirs announcing Jesus' birth to shepherds (vv. 6-18). In the next section of this chapter, the rest of Jesus' life begins. He is circumcised (v. 21) and presented in the Temple (vv. 22-24). Then Mary and Joseph return to their home in Nazareth (v. 39).

Luke goes to great effort in this passage to show Jesus—as represented by Mary and Joseph's actions—is a faithful Jew, following the precepts of the law (vv. 21, 22, 27, 39). His circumcision occurs at the appointed age—8

days—as stated in Leviticus 12:3. The presentation of Jesus in the Temple also coincided with the conclusion of Mary’s 40-day post-partum period of purification, which concluded with an offering by the priest (Luke 2:24; Leviticus 12:8).

In all these maneuvers, Luke tells us Mary and Joseph did what was “required by the Law of Moses” (v. 22) and “what the custom of the Law required (v. 27). Interestingly, then, Luke’s Gospel, which will push Jesus’ significance beyond the boundaries of Israel, wants us to see Jesus as faithful to Israel’s religious customs and practices. In short, Jesus does not come to abolish Israel and its promises, but to fulfill them.

Surprising for both the reader and Jesus’ parents, two additional encounters happen while the holy family is in the Temple. In fact, Luke’s narration implies these events were not planned ahead of time—at least not by any human beings in the story—and they interrupt Mary and Joseph’s actions during their visit.

First, Simeon, a “righteous and devout” man on whom was the Holy Spirit (v. 25), saw the child, held him and issued a prayer of praise to God. In this prayer, Simeon thanks God for the opportunity to see “your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (vv. 30-32). Once again, we find Jesus’ mission at the boundaries between Israel and the Gentiles (non-Israel).

Activity of the Spirit

Moreover, Luke emphasizes the activity of the Spirit of the Lord, who is mentioned three times in connection with Simeon (vv. 25-27). This Gospel takes seriously that God is active in the world and is to be found in the nitty gritty of human existence, as Simeon declares here in the Temple. God is among us.

In the second encounter, a prophet named Anna approached Mary, Joseph and Jesus. As many scholars have observed, Luke's Gospel, more than the others, elevates the role of women. Thus, Anna should be seen as parallel to Simeon, meaning much of what is said about him can be extended to her. In fact, we might say she also is "waiting for the consolation of Israel" and has been moved by the Spirit to this moment (v. 25). Like Simeon, she sees the child and offers praise to God and begins to share the good news about Christ's coming (v. 38).

Several additional things should be noted. First, Simeon's praises are joined to more somber words that are somewhat cryptic. He tells Mary, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul, too" (vv. 34-35). Likely a reference to Jesus' ultimate end at Calvary, Simeon offers to Mary words of preparation as the child grows into the fullness of his mission.

Recognizing Jesus

Further, Simeon's prayer is known to the church as the *Nunc Dimittis*, after the Latin for his opening words, "you may now dismiss." This beautiful set of words also has found a home within daily Christian prayers. In the Daily Office—a prayer program practiced by Christians around the world—the *Nunc Dimittis* stands as the final thanksgiving of each day, concluding each daily cycle by entering God's rest.

In other words, we, unlike Simeon, have seen and continually see the Savior who was prepared for all the world to see: "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel" (v. 32). During this Christmas season, may we have the eyes to recognize Jesus all around us on the occasion of his birth.