

Ron Gilmer  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas Day  
Year B  
University Presbyterian Church  
Tuscaloosa, AL  
28 December 2008

**THE MESSIAH...AT LAST**  
**LUKE 2:21-40**

At last we can say it, "Merry Christmas." At last we can sing, "Joy to the world the Lord is come: Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare Him room, And heaven and nature sing. Joy to the world! The Savior reigns."

Hallelujah! The Savior reigns. In the past month, the church has come full circle. The lectionary year concludes with a coronation and a promise, with a celebration of Christ's reign on earth that will be as glorious and his reign in heaven.

Then as Advent begins, we are reminded that there was an earth before a Jesus, at least a historical Jesus whose story is told in Luke, the one that begins, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." Rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, Mary and Joseph set forth for Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem. Then, to quote Luke, "The time comes for her to deliver her child" proving yet again that even when Caesar seems to reign, God is ultimately sovereign.

The language that Luke employs seems so stately, so dignified. Gentle Mary, meek and mild, seems to give birth effortlessly before an internationally televised audience with a choir of angels singing in the background and illuminating the scene.

Give credit to the editors, whether they belong to Mary or Luke, because anybody who has ever watched or participated in a delivery knows that the experience is earthy, and yet the grittiest part of

Luke's narrative is displacement, physical displacement. Mary and Joseph are displaced first from home and then from the inn where they would rather be staying.

Displaced, Mary and Joseph end up among shepherds and animals, both of whom smell badly. Remember how Luke introduces the former: "In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night." Hmm...shepherds living in the fields...shepherds who attend the Messiah's birth live in fields. They are essentially homeless. Perhaps this is where the historical Jesus' affinity for the homeless begins (if not with his parents, at least on the night that he is born).

When the angel appears to the shepherds (Luke does not say whether this is Gabriel or not), the shepherds, believe it or not, are horrified, and what does the angel say? Do not be afraid. This imperative is followed by an explanation: "behold---I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you (yes, you...and you and you and you) is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find the child wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a manger." No, the NRSV does not use the word "swaddling," but I find it, like God's grace, irresistible. "Swaddling" is a word that helps me to see, to envision the scene and yet it also helps me to feel the miracle of God's presence. I know what it is like to swaddle, and I know how comforting it is to be swaddled.

In Luke's Gospel, as soon as we are told that Jesus is wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, angels begin to sing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors." Apparently, the performance is convincing, because the shepherds respond by saying, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us," and Luke reports that they go "with haste," as if they have a deadline to meet.

Much of what we do in response to God's grace when God gathers us to worship is mark time. I do not know about you, but I regard deadlines as gracious and extensions as merciful. Not long ago, somebody asked me, "What is the biggest difference between seminary and the parish?" Without

giving it much thought, I said, “11 o’clock, Sunday morning.” At 11 o’clock on Sunday morning, one never has the option of asking for an extension from the professor if he is a student or from the registrar if she is a professor.

Advent helps us to hear the words of prophets more clearly and with a sense of urgency, because Christmas comes ready or not. It fascinates me to watch Jesus, who is exalted as sovereign on Reign of Christ Sunday, be pigeon-holed into one prophecy or another during Advent and then be shrunk into an infant-sized Messiah on Christmas Day. Whatever happened to the church’s recognition of this baby’s omnipotence, of God’s sovereignty? He is still with us. His name is Emmanuel. To his glory, we sing Sunday after Sunday, season after season.

Our observance of Advent concluded with Mary’s song; and today’s Gospel reading focuses on the canticle of Simeon, a children’s blessing that echoes the opening of Second Isaiah: “Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.” Sleep in heavenly peace. Comfort, speak tenderly and sleep. Somehow the thought of a baby in a manger helps me to do so.

That baby, however, does not stay a baby, and given the way that Scriptures are written and the ebb and flow of the liturgical year, that baby, who was still inside his mother’s womb last Sunday, was born on Thursday and is being brought to the temple to be circumcised this morning. Mary and Joseph adhere to the law of Moses by offering “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons” to the Lord (and here “Lord” refers to the One to whom Jesus prays while on earth).

Two turtledoves and a partridge in a pear tree: Uh, oh...some songs probably should not be introduced in sermons, because the tunes may haunt you throughout the service. Or, as in the case of this song, the problem is that one could become distracted by trying to remember all twelve entities and which ones go with which number: How many ladies dance? How many lords leap?

I bring up this song to remind us that, contrary to popular belief, Christmas is not over. It is only beginning. The church is at odds with the culture in which we find ourselves in that: (1) the church does

not believe that Christmas is a three month festival beginning in October and ending on December 25; and (2) the church does not regard the gift of Christmas as disposable.

Christmas is not a cliff that we drive off as soon as the last earthly gift is unwrapped. It is the start of a season that is to be savored, because it takes time for all to be gathered to Bethlehem by God. Christmas is not about unwrapping. It is about a baby being wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. It is about swaddling and being swaddled by love, God's love in Jesus Christ who becomes flesh and dwells among us.

"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." Simeon was being swaddled by God's Spirit: "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah."

Today, when Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple to be circumcised, God reveals the Messiah to Simeon; God grants Simeon permission to die, because in Jesus Christ, there is hope even in death. Thus Simeon blesses this baby, his Lord and Savior: "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 (not merely our enemies), a light for revelation to the Gentiles (who need it) and for glory to your people Israel (who have been praying for comfort since November)."

Mary and Joseph listen closely as Simeon proclaims, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed---and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Anna confirms this calling, even as she praises God and speaks about the child to all who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Enough is not said about this story, especially Anna's part in it, and I suspect that this has something to do with its place among lectionary readings. Often worship follows a different pattern on the First Sunday after Christmas. Dare I say it? Sometimes there is a lull in the action.

By juxtaposing Jesus' presentation in the temple with the birth narrative, Luke continues to grapple with the mysteries of incarnation, revelation and redemption and to insist that they are---or will---be unveiled slowly but surely in Jesus Christ. The life that we celebrate on Christmas Day will be bruised on Holy Week and resurrected on Easter.

A phrase from the canticle of Simeon that stays with me is "so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed---and a sword will pierce your own soul too." Why does God become flesh and dwell among us? So that inner thoughts may be revealed. Beyond this flesh, there is soul: Christ's; yours; mine. Souls are pierced, just as flesh is pierced; and yet, in the face of death, let us not be afraid. In the face of prejudice, let us welcome those who are as grungy as shepherds into our midst. Where there is pain---brokenness, bitterness and strife---let us swaddle and be swaddled, because, in Jesus Christ, every one of us from Mary to Simeon has a song to sing, and this song is full of joy. To the God of all grace, who calls you to share God's eternal glory in union with Christ, be the power forever. Amen.