



# “A Baby, Two Old People, and Us”

Text: Luke 2:21-40

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

My niece is expecting her first child. There is already a great deal of excitement in my sister's house. This child will be born in California and, I would be willing to wager, will be whisked off to Michigan before attaining a California tan. There has already been one shower. There will undoubtedly be more.

A new twist is a party that is held to disclose the gender of the baby. These “gender reveal” parties have become quite elaborate and, quite often, garish. A box of balloons is opened and the traditional colors of pink or blue are let loose to announce the tidings of great joy. It's kind of like waiting for a pope to be elected. White smoke or black smoke?

There's nothing quite like a baby to make you question the sanity of some adults. Trust me. I've just spent a month watching perfectly normal adults behave like deranged chimpanzees, in order to get a child who wants nothing to do with a fat man in a red suit, take the perfect picture. Without moving so much as a finger of their dimpled hands, these newborns can make a room full of adults look like stark-raving idiots.

And there are the unique rituals and reverences that must be observed. The antique baptismal gown is hauled out of storage and placed on another generation of the family as they make their entrance into the family of God. Water from a place beloved by the family is brought into the church for the baptism. There's a party, the first of many, at which this child will be feted.

Well, there are some rituals and reverences which were observed at the time of Jesus' birth. We hardly ever spend much time with them. We know little about them. But, as the calendar falls this year, we can take a day to remember that when Jesus was born, he was born into a faith and tradition in which certain things were expected to take place.

We are told, by Luke's gospel, that on the eighth day of Jesus' life, he was circumcised according to the law of Moses and the tradition of the Jews. This would not necessarily have taken place in the Temple. Quite often, the local synagogue or the family home would have been the setting. In Jesus' case, we are left without information on the location, as we are left without so much information of Jesus' formative years.

But that reminds us that gospels are not biographies. Each gospel has, as its purpose, the proclamation of the good news and serves to undergird and strengthen belief in God's love made known in Jesus Christ. Luke's particular purpose is quite clear: Luke presents Jesus as a Jew born among Jews, living his life under the mitzvot, or commandments, of God, living in obedience to God from his earliest days. Jesus is fully and completely a Jew, a child of the covenant, a faithful observer of the law.

Then, 40 days after his birth, Jesus is taken to the Temple in Jerusalem, the geographic center of Luke's gospel. The purpose has little to do with Jesus, but everything to do with Mary. According to the law of Moses, you can check it in Leviticus 12, a woman is considered ritually impure for forty days, following the birth of a son. Mary and Joseph offer an offering that is acceptable, though it reflects their possible social standing: a pair of turtle doves, a humble offering. They bring the offering to the Temple, which the priest offers, thus insuring her purification.

Luke also cites the idea of "redeeming" the first born son, because the first born is considered the Lord's. The father would offer five shekels to the priest, to redeem - or to buy back - his firstborn son from God. There is debate among scholars whether or not this was necessary, but the idea that Luke would raise the notion of redemption early in his gospel is certainly a tip-of-the-hand to what Jesus would be all about.

What is interesting is that there is no requirement for Jesus to be presented in the Temple. Luke draws parallels between the childhoods of Samuel, the prophet, and Jesus. Their mothers sing nearly the same song when they discover their pregnancies. So the idea of presenting Jesus in the temple may be a reflection of Samuel's presentation in the temple.

But what happens next is fascinating. First, an old man, identified as Simeon, comes to the Temple at the same time all these other things are happening. Simeon takes the infant Jesus in his arms and begins to give thanks to God, with what was and continues to be, a hymn of the church. Known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, Simeon celebrates God's faithfulness in sending one who will bring salvation and healing, light to illumine the path of the Gentiles, and glory to the people of Israel.

Simeon also has a word for Mary and Joseph. "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 shall pierce your own soul too." Jesus' teaching and preaching will create divisions among people and, especially to Mary, cause deep sorrow

as well as deep joy.

Just then, another old person appears. She is the prophet Anna. Anna is comparable to other great women in Judaism: Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and others. Anna is the ultimate church lady - nearly living in the Temple every day. She, like Simeon, gives thanks to God for this child, in whom she somehow sees God's promises fulfilled.

I wonder how Mary and Joseph must have thought about all of this. I wonder what their conversation was on the way home. Did they talk about it? Who broached the subject? Did they compare their stories of angels visiting them to tell them everything was according to a plan beyond their doing and understanding?

It is, of course, perfectly normal and, frankly, expected that parents have conversations about their children, beginning on the day of their birth. Who will this child become? What course will their life take? What will they accomplish? This blank canvass of a life is before them and I can't help but think that they began sketching out a portrait of who this son of theirs would become.

These two old people seem to have figured it all out in what can only be described as a moment of miraculous insight and revelation. Simeon and Anna are perfectly clear about who they see this infant becoming. This child is the child of promise - the child of expectation - the child for whom the generations have waited and yearned.

And what about us? When we think about this baby, what do we see? Another adorable infant that we just want to hold. Are we a little like the character Ricky Bobby in the movie *Talladega Nights*, who states his preference for the baby Jesus? As Ricky says grace, his wife, Carley, says, "Hey, um... you know sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd and off puttin' to pray to a baby." Ricky shoots right back, "Well look, I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I'm sayin grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grown up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whatever you want." Do we just see a baby and do we prefer the baby who asks little or nothing from us?

Or do we catch a glimpse of what Simeon and Anna saw. When we look at Jesus, do we see someone who will turn the world upside down? Do we see someone who will divide falsehood from truth? Do we see one who will teach love and not hate? Do we see one who will cause many to be cast down and even more to be lifted up?

It's not enough to sing the carols and light the candles. What are we going to do with this baby and the man he will become? Will we wrap him in bands of doctrine that make him attainable to us but unreachable to others? Will we present him gifts that cost us little in the hope that he will gift us beyond our wildest dreams? Will we use him as a wedge to divide us from others? Will we employ his teachings to gratify ourselves while damning others?

Jesus was born to teach us - in a most profound way - the lesson of love. That's what Christianity is supposed to be - a way of living love to all people. Our faith is to be about loving God and loving neighbor, and anything that is purported to be a Christian teaching that denies that essential truth is a falsehood.

This baby we celebrate did grow up and taught us to love one another. It a hard lesson to learn and an even harder lesson to live. But it is truly what Christianity is all about.

At Christmas, we often hear words of Christian Rossetti. An English poet, we know her for two carols we sing. She penned the words to "In the Bleak Midwinter." We've been singing the last verse:

What can I give Him, poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.  
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.  
Yet what I can I give Him: Give my heart.

She also wrote a lesser known carol to us. It's been set to music by many great composers. The lyrics are:

Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love Divine,  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,  
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,  
Worship we our Jesus,  
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,  
Love be yours and love be mine,  
Love to God and all men,  
Love for plea and gift and sign.

Love shall be our token. Love to God and all people. Love. For now and evermore. Amen.



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