



# “Beginnings and Endings”

Text: Luke 2:22-40

*a sermon by the Rev. Kevin Scott Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

This service is always anti-climactic, but maybe even more so this year, as we didn't have much of a climactic moment. As I have told you in the past, this is the Sunday when associate pastors and seminary students are often given the opportunity to ply their trade. Had I been a bit more on the ball, I could be running the video and Jerusha could be preaching. Maybe next year. That will give me plenty of time to learn how all of this technology works.

Our passage from Luke's gospel continues the narrative of Jesus' birth. We are told that Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem for two purposes: to present Jesus to the Lord and to be circumcised - and this is conjecture among scholars - to participate in "the redemption of the firstborn." (This was not the time for Mary's ritual purification following childbirth, which would take place 40 days after giving birth.)

The redemption of the firstborn is detailed in various places in the Hebrew Scriptures, but hear it again from verses taken from Exodus:

Consecrate to me whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human and animals, it is mine...

You shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb...

When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.

(Exodus 13:2, 12, 15)

Now, there is no law that requires this presentation to be made, but Luke may be trying to connect this story to the story of Samuel's presentation, much as he connected Mary's song of magnification of God to Hannah's song of thanksgiving and celebration.

The important things are these. Mary and Joseph faithfully observed the law and brought the 8-day old Jesus to the temple to be circumcised and numbered among the people of Israel. They most likely observed the custom of "redeeming the first-born." And they made sacrifice at the Temple - the only place where sacrifice took place - offering the most meager of sacrifices: a pair of young pigeons or turtledoves.

The story reminds us that birth is both an ending and a beginning. The nine months of waiting had been, as the old translation puts it, "accomplished." The waiting and the preparations were over. The gender reveal party had taken place thanks to the angel Gabriel. (It was a lovely, though somewhat frightening affair.) A rather strange event took place on the night of the child's birth with a band of rag-tag shepherds showing up. (And evidently one of them had a drum - which is just what is needed in a newborn nursery).

And there is a beginning. This child was welcomed as a new member of the household of Israel - he was part of a community. He was initiated in the ancient way of circumcision, and if you think children cry when they are baptized, there is no comparison. He was presented to God and dedicated to God, the fullness of that presentation and dedication would be realized decades later. But the infant Jesus' feet were placed on the path of learning Torah and living faithfully. He would be raised in the tradition of his forebearers. He would learn to read the words of the scrolls. He would debate and argue the passages as was the custom - then and now. There was an ending and a beginning.

The couple encounters a strange old man named Simeon. Simeon carried with him a great longing, a desire, a deep and pervasive hope. Nearing the ending of his own life, would he ever see his longing satisfied, his desire fulfilled, his hope realized? He wasn't really sure why he was in the Temple that day. It was as though something had nudged him, led him there. He was accustomed to trusting such promptings.

He saw a couple with an infant. There were likely lots of couples with infants there that day. But this couple and this infant were different. He felt drawn to them. He felt a compulsion to meet them. The old man reached for the infant. Astonishingly, the parents handed him over. Joy filled the old man's face and tears filled the old man's eyes.

Master, you are now dismissing  
your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation  
which you prepared  
in the presence of all peoples.  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for the glory of your people Israel.

With this child's beginning, the old man found a peaceful ending for himself. Here was the fulfillment he longed for. Here was the hope realized. Here was a promise kept.

But, before old Simeon disappeared from the scene, he shared a word with Mary. As great as this child would be, his life would be complicated, and his life would complicate the lives of others. And as for Mary, her heart would be broken.

No new parent wants to hear stories of sadness about what their child would become. No new parent wants anything to do with the idea of a troubled future for their infant child. New parents only want to dream happy dreams and envision blissful lives for their children.

Here at the beginning of this child's life there is talk of its ending. A shadow is cast over the path the child would walk. Uncertainty is now at play.

Another old person, nearing the end of her life, the prophet Anna, sees the child and embraces it with the message of how this child's life would make the greatest difference of all. A holy and righteous woman dedicated and committed to God, she sees in the infant a child of destiny - the promised redemption of the people - the promised keeping of the promising, covenanting God. In this child, Anna sees the ending of the past and the beginning of a new and brighter future.

Every beginning has an ending and every ending has a beginning. We are, after all, temporal creatures - captives of time. It's not maudlin to think about it or talk about it. It is the way it is. "To everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die..." As one of my friends put it, "none of us gets out of this alive."

This past year has been filled with far too many beginnings and endings. We witnessed the beginning of the pandemic just a little less than a year ago. We watched as lives changed in dramatic ways. We sequestered in our homes, distanced from family and friends. We heard reports of those we know and love falling ill with the virus. We watched the death toll begin to climb and then explode exponentially.

And then we heard the long-awaited news of a vaccine. And then two. And then more in the pipeline. People began getting the vaccine. A new beginning was afoot, not yet realized, but the longed-for hope - the desire for an end to sickness and sadness - began to come into clarity.

As one member of our household puts it, "this is the worst 2020 ever." It's hard to argue with that. But it's nearly gone. In just a few days, we'll put away this "annus horribilus" and welcome a new year.

We will join with Alfred Lord Tennyson and sing:

Ring out, wild bells, to the wild sky, The flying cloud, the frosty light: The year is dying in the night; Ring out, wild bells, and let him die.	Ring out the want, the care, the sin, The faithless coldness of the times; Ring out, ring out my mournful rhymes
Ring out the old, ring in the new, Ring, happy bells, across the snow: The year is going, let him go; Ring out the false, ring in the true.	But ring the fuller minstrel in. Ring out false pride in place and blood,
Ring out the grief that saps the mind For those that here we see no more; Ring out the feud of rich and poor, Ring in redress to all mankind.	The civic slander and the spite; Ring in the love of truth and right, Ring in the common love of good.
Ring out a slowly dying cause, And ancient forms of party strife; Ring in the nobler modes of life, With sweeter manners, purer laws.	Ring out old shapes of foul disease; Ring out the narrowing lust of gold; Ring out the thousand wars of old, Ring in the thousand years of peace.
	Ring in the valiant man and free, The larger heart, the kindlier hand; Ring out the darkness of the land, Ring in the Christ that is to be.

Beginnings and endings. They come to us all.

But bear this in mind:

"Remember not the former things,  
nor consider the things of old. (Isaiah 43:18)

Behold, I am doing a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:19)

"For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth,  
and the former things shall not be remembered  
or come into mind. (Isaiah 65:17)

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am  
making all things new." (Revelation 21:5)

Our God makes all things new - even you - and even me.  
Receive the new beginnings and give the endings a fond farewell.  
Ring in the Christ that is to be! For now and evermore. Amen.