



“Moving Right Along”

Text: Luke 2:22-40

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

December 31, 2017

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Well, to all outward appearances, we have survived.

The hustle and bustle of getting all the packages, wrapping them, opening them, and finding a place to put the new stuff is probably over. The returns and exchanges have been made. The poinsettias look a little less fresh than they did a week or two ago. The cut pine is limp and drying out. The Christmas cookie supply is getting rather thin. The parties and the recoveries have played out. Christmas, to all outward appearances, has been survived.

If your house is anything like ours, this week the trees will come down and the ornaments will be wrapped and put away until next year. The nativity scenes will be nestled away for their 11-month nap. The outdoor decorations will be packed away.

We will get back to “normal.”

But, the reality is that we’re not quite through with Christmas. There is today – the Sunday after Christmas – and there is the Feast of the Epiphany, which we will observe next week. We’re not quite ready to be completely finished with Christmas just yet. There’s still some work to do.

One of the most important pieces of that work is that we need to let the infant Jesus begin to grow up. Back in my days of being a Christian educator, I had a group of younger children drawing pictures of Jesus after Christmas. One of the children drew a picture of an infant on a cross. There had simply been insufficient time in this child’s understanding for the traditional thirty-three years to have passed. Christmas was in December and Easter was in March – three months. According to this child’s logic, Jesus was an infant when he died.

For some, Jesus never grows up. For some, Jesus is always the infant of Bethlehem. For some, lingering at the manger is a lifetime posture. For some, Jesus is the ever innocent, never-demanding Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and we owe him nothing more than our homage and worship.

But, that will not do. There's more to Jesus' story than his birth. And, beginning with this Sunday, we are "moving right along."

The presentation in the Temple, the account of which we read in Luke's gospel, takes place forty days after Jesus' birth. According to Jewish law, at forty days, Mary had to be declared ritually clean after childbirth and Jesus needed to be redeemed as the first-born son, with a sacrifice. Sacrifices could be offered only at the Temple in Jerusalem, so more traveling was required. Imagine a trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, presumably back to Nazareth, and then back to Jerusalem, with a return trip to Nazareth, all in the matter of forty days. And you think you are tired after Christmas!

The sacrifice that Joseph and Mary offer is the sacrifice of the poor. They did not have the ability or the resources to offer a lamb, or a greater offering. They offered the offering of the poor: a pair of doves or pigeons. It's not that they over-spent on Christmas. They simply never had an abundance of money. They were poor, humble people who scratched out a living from hard work and subsistence living. Perhaps Luke is reminding us that there is a place for the poor in the Realm of God that we too easily forget.

In the Temple, they meet two strange, old people: Simeon and Anna. Both are devoted to God. Anna is even called a prophet. Both of them encounter the parents and the Child. Neither one of them says, "What a beautiful baby!" or "how proud you must be." Neither of them says anything at all about the baby-ness of the baby.

Instead, both look through the baby and into the life that is yet to be realized. Simeon sees in the life that is yet to be lived "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to God's people Israel." Simeon saw in the life yet to be lived, one "destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." Anna saw the Child and immediately began praising God and speaking to everyone she met about this Child and how this Child and the redemption of Israel were connected.

Neither Simeon nor Anna talked about the Baby. They began talking about mission, and purpose, and objective. They looked through the infant and saw an adult who would take on the work of God in a new way - in a unique way - in a way that would divide people - and bring both joy and grief. These two faithful people, with the eyes of faith and hope, saw in this Child more than they could ever have expected. They didn't see a Baby. They saw a Savior.

As much as we get wrapped up in the joy and wonder of Christmas and the Baby lying in a manger, we have to keep moving right along. Jesus, in order to be who Jesus was sent to be, cannot be confined to nativity scenes and Christmas carols that often contain horrible theology. We must allow Jesus to grow up, to face his destiny, to pass through the waters of baptism, to endure temptation, to face adulation and humiliation, and even death. We must let the entire story play itself out, for only then can we see the faithfulness and boundless grace of our God.

I don't think many of you have seen the movie "Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby," a parody of all things Nascar starring Wil Ferrell. In the movie, Ferrell's character, Ricky Bobby, asks the grace over a meal. He begins, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus," and the prayer takes a few strange turns after that. But then, an argument ensues, and Ricky Bobby's wife, Carley, says, "Hey, you know sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him 'baby.' It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby." Ricky responds, "Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When you say grace you can say it to grown-up Jesus, or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want."

Of course we all like the Christmas Jesus because he comes without comment, without observation, without criticism. The Christmas Jesus comes without a call to repent and walk a new path. The Christmas Jesus doesn't condemn our ill-conceived actions or absolve us of our ignorant inactions.

When Jesus grows up, he challenges us to live in an entirely new way. When Jesus grows up, he makes us uncomfortable by his words and by his actions. When Jesus grows up, we face a decision to change and walk a new path or to stay the same and walk the well-worn path the world always treads. When Jesus grows up, he opens our eyes to the poor, the forgotten, the oppressed, the sick, the addicted, the victimized, and all those we would just as soon never see. Little wonder so many so love Dear Lord Baby Jesus.

But, like it or not, Jesus grows up. Things keep moving right along. Next week, it's Epiphany and the wise men arrive. And then, in two weeks, Jesus appears at the Jordan River – fully grown – and ready to be baptized and begin his ministry. We are moving right along.

And that is what God has in mind. We're leaving the manger behind and moving on. Simeon saw it. So did Anna. There's more to this story than a silent, holy night.

In his Ceremony of Carols, Benjamin Britten includes this old lyric. It captures what's really happening here:

This little babe so few days old
Is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake
Though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this week unarmed wise
The gates of hell he will surprise

With tears he fights and wins the field
His naked breast stands for a shield
His battering shot are babish cries
His arrows looks of weeping eyes
His martial ensigns Cold and Need
And feeble flesh his warrior's steed

Where His camp is pitched in a stall
His bulwark but a broken wall;
The crib his trench, haystalks his stakes
Of shepherds he his muster makes
And thus as sure his foe to wound
The angels' trumps alarm sound

My soul with Christ
Join thou in fight;
Stick to the tents
That he hath pight
Within his crib
Is surest ward;
This little Babe
Will by thy guard
If thou wilt foil thy
Foes with joy, then
Flit not from this
Heavenly boy!

We're moving right along. Glory to God! For now and evermore.
Amen.



First
Presbyterian
Church

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

First Presbyterian Church
is a partner congregation with
the Covenant Network
of Presbyterians.

