

Anna & Simeon, the Prophets
Isaiah 61:10-62:3, Luke 2:22-40

Merry Christmas. You know many people ask the question, “Did you have a nice Christmas?” Right away, that implies that Christmas is in the past. Others have packed up and put away all the Christmas decorations, and for them, Christmas is done for this year. No. As many of us know, there are twelve days to Christmas and the season of Christmas continues today. So when you see each other today, say to one another, “Merry Christmas and a happy new year.” This is the Season of Christmas and we continue to celebrate the coming of God into the lives of all humanity in the form of a fully human baby, born into meager circumstances.

Today we turn our focus from the lowly manger and the unlikely shepherds to whom Jesus first came, as we look at two more unlikely people to first greet the Messiah King. Simeon and Anna are not included in the traditional nativities offered by Christmas marketing. This scripture is often ignored or overlooked in the preaching series for Christmas. I confess to you that I don’t think I have ever preached on this passage.

We remember that Simeon was an old man, waiting to see the Messiah. He didn’t see any miracles; he didn’t see any signs; he didn’t see any wonders. He simply saw the baby Jesus and he said, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation which has been prepared for all people.” No miracles. No signs. No wonders. He just saw the Christ child and believed. That was enough. Simeon was fulfilled and he was ready to leave this earth because he had seen the fulfillment of the promise made by God through the ancient prophets of the OT.

Then we have the story of Anna, who was eighty-four years old. She was a widow and poor. For her also, there were no miracles, no signs, no wonders. All she saw was the Christ child and she too believed.

“At the end of the eight days when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for the purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law, a pair of turtle doves and two young pigeons.”

There are many rituals surrounding the birth of new baby into the family. Whether biologically or by means of adoption, today there is a new ritual of the gender reveal, which often becomes a party for friends and family. There is the ritual of not to tell everybody immediately. Then there is the ritual where you finally go and announce your pregnancy to a special person e.g. the mother and father, best friends, grandma and grandpa, and the other special people in your life. They hear those great words, “We are going to have a baby.” This is a ritual and we all go through these rituals. A person then goes through the ritual of trying to select a name. You go through several books of names, looking for the right name. You go through the names of the parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, best friends, special people. You ask the question: what

is the right name for this child. Then the baby is born and then the husband often goes and buys cigars. Now, I don't know why. Another of the rituals of childhood is that we know that blue is for boys and the color pink is for girls. The hospital maternity ward wraps little baby boys in blue blankets and wraps little baby girls in pink blankets. And then the baptism comes. As Presbyterian, we bring the infant for infant baptism. The grandparents are there. Friends are invited. It is a grand celebration when the closest family and friends gather for the baptism, the water, the candle, the pride, the joy. These are all deeply ingrained rituals of birth here in America, here in our church, here in our hearts. These rituals are all part of our culture.

Well, Jesus was real, a real live baby, and Jesus also went through the rituals of his babyhood, just like we go through babyhood rituals. There were at least three rituals to Jesus' infancy at eight days, another at thirty-one days; and another at forty days.

At eight days, Jesus was circumcised and everybody came to his house for this sacred event. All the aunts, uncles, grandmas, grandpas, the brothers and sisters. They all came together for this big potluck over at the house. Now, they didn't come over to the church, temple or synagogue but to the house for this celebration. Circumcision was a home ritual.

Now, from 900 to 1800 Christian Era, the circumcisions were done in the synagogue. But Jesus was born before that. For the ancient Jewish people, the circumcisions were done in the home with the family. It was a home religious ritual. It was also the time of naming the child. Circumcision was also the naming day. That is, during the service of circumcision, the child was given his name, which in this case, was the name Jesus. They asked the question, "How shall this child be named?" His name shall be "Joshua." Yeshua. In Greek, Yeshua. In Hebrew, Joshua. It was a common name such as Jim, John and Mary a few decades ago or Sean, Katelyn, or Megan today. Mary and Joseph gave their son a plain and ordinary name that was common and well known among their friends. In this common and ordinary event, they would have circumcised Jesus and he would have howled in pain; he would not have like that. The grandmas and grandpas would have all looked on and rejoiced that this new baby had such great lung power and could howl so long and loudly. Circumcision, itself, was the cutting off of the foreskin of the male genital as a sign of the covenant between God and the person being circumcised. That is what happened when Jesus was eight days old.

Then at thirty-one days old, if it was a normal process, he would have been brought to the temple in Jerusalem for the service of dedication. This is a second big trip up to Jerusalem on the thirty-first day. Why? Because it was the first born male. What you always did with the first-born male in a patriarchal society, you brought them up to the temple.

In a patriarchal society, it was a special position to be the first born male. Jesus was the first born male and he would have gone through that ritual of dedication. So there was a childhood ritual at thirty-one days.

Then, on the fortieth day, there was a third ritual of childhood, and this ritual had to do with Mary. It was called the rite of purification. Not for the baby but for the mother. Mary needed

to be purified. If she had given birth to a boy, she was to stay at home for forty days and not come out of the house. If she gave birth to a girl, she was to remain at home for eighty days. I have a feeling that this was the way a patriarchal society punished a woman for giving birth to a daughter rather than a son. In a patriarch society, boys were more valued than girls. If a mother gave birth to a daughter, she was to remain home for twice as long. According to the Jewish law, Mary was to come to the synagogue on the fortieth day. The law told her to offer a sacrifice of a lamb or if she could not afford a lamb, she was to offer two turtle doves or two pigeons. She sacrifices two turtle doves or two pigeons and this indicates that Jesus was raised in a poor family.

Jesus went through his cultural traditions just as we go through coming home from the hospital, passing out cigars, pink is for girls and blue is for boys. It is important for us to realize and understand this as these are indicators of Jesus' fully human.

You see, the humanity of Jesus has often been a stumbling block for Christians. The incarnation: God coming fully as a human being has been a stumbling block for believers. We want Jesus to be a super baby and not just a baby. Then we want him to grow up to be a super child and not just a child. Then we want him to grow up to be a superman and not just a man. And pretty soon, we want him to be a super god who has a magic wand of a fairy godmother and not be the true God of the Bible.

During the season of Christmas and these twelve days of Christmas, we celebrate the fact that Jesus was truly human. Jesus was like bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh and mind of our mind and emotions of my emotions and skin of my skin. This kid was a real human being and when he was circumcised, he howled with pain...as any normal baby would do.

Now, why is this so important to underscore the humanity of Jesus? Because the humanity of Jesus underscores for us the humanity of God. Talking about the humanity of Jesus gives us a clue about the humanity of God. That God comes to us in very plain and ordinary ways. Through the waters of baptism; through the words of the Bible; through the bread and wine of Holy Communion. God comes to us through ordinary people like shepherds watching their flocks by night. God comes to us through elderly citizens like Simeon and Anna.

God uses plain and ordinary flesh and blood people like you and me to get the job done, to get his message across to us. That is the message of Christmas. God comes through the plain and ordinary, the fully human person like baby Jesus. God was born to a plain and ordinary little fourteen-year old girl. He was born in a stable, in a manger full of straw, with the smell of real, live animals in the barn. God chose the common and the natural, the humble and the ordinary, to express his love to us. That is the message of Christmas. Amen.