

BEING THERE

Luke 2:22-40

Mary and Joseph are doing **the expected thing**. There are possibly dozens, if not scores, of young families presenting newborns in the Temple that day.

In Exod 34:19-20 we read:

All that first opens the womb is mine ... all the first born of your sons you shall redeem. No one shall appear before me empty-handed.

The service of redemption was an offering given to God in place of the son, in effect, **the parents buy the child back rather than offer him to God for service in the Temple**. You remember **Hannah**, who brought her son Samuel to the Temple in honor of the vow she made to God, that if God would give her a child, she would not redeem him but would **give him back to God in service**.

Even today, **among orthodox Jews**, the firstborn son is presented to a kohen, a ritual official of the synagogue, who asks if he is to be donated or redeemed, and the father gives the kohen redemption money.

I have often told my congregations that we need to read **the Gospels like poetry**. It is important to pay attention to each word, and to what is missing, in order to understand what the author is intending. **Luke is being very subtle here**. Although Jesus is presented at the Temple, he is *not* redeemed. Luke wants us to know, from the beginning, that Jesus belongs completely to God, he will serve God his whole life, and that he is not in need of redemption, because **he himself is himself the Redeemer**. --from William C. Platcher, "Christ Takes Our Place," Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology; vol 53, no. 1. January 1999, p. 10

Instead, Mary and Joseph offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving of turtledoves and two young pigeons. This was the smallest gift acceptable, it shows that Mary and Joseph, as devout as they were, were also **among the poorest of the poor**. Most of the tradesmen of the day were not private businessmen, they were peasant farmers who had lost their land to taxes or debt; now they would work, day to day, **hand to mouth**, to support their families.

An old man, Simeon, was at the temple that day. The Holy Spirit had told him he would not die until he had personally seen the Lord's Messiah. And so, day after day, he came to the Temple to pray, to celebrate and to await the coming of the Christ. **It's not as if he knew what he was looking for**.

Like most of the people of his age, he expected the Messiah to be a powerful figure, regal and royal—or at least a grown-up. And day after day, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. But Simeon didn't care, he did not lose heart, day after day he showed up, he waited and watched.

Simeon was already a happy man when he met Jesus. He was just and religious. He was waiting for the consolation of Jerusalem, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. Quite a biography in a few words! Scratch a happy senior adult and you'll find hope. Scratch a sad one, and you'll find despair. Despair is expressed most often like this, "Things aren't as good as they used to be. The bread is bad. The coffee is bad. The roads are bad, and so on and so forth. Simeon does not have his head in the sand, he knows things are getting worse under the Roman occupation, but instead of despairing he is waiting for the reversal. He has put his hope in the future not in the past.

Another thing we know about Simeon is that he was ready to have his expectations overturned. He has been looking for a king, a warrior, a figure out of the Lord of the Rings with mystery and a sword. But when he sees this ordinary, impoverished little family, celebrating the birth of their first-born son, he sees something no one else seems to have noticed. The answer to prayer, the hope of life itself, the Messiah who will be the Savior not only of Israel, but of the world as well.

He is able to see because was ready to see. He was there, in the right place at the right time. Woody Allen says that 95% of the secret to life is showing up. For Simeon and for Anna that was true. Had they not been devout, they would not have been there for Jesus. Had they not been faithful in waiting, they would not have seen him when he arrived.

Imagine the enormity of the gift this old couple gave to the rest of the people there, even to Mary and Joseph. These young parents recognized in the baby Jesus the Messiah. They were only just beginning to see the signs as they gathered. But this elderly couple took seriously their responsibility of being old, of being the wise ones, who saw more deeply than others.

The job of us old people is to show what is true. Not to go live in our own past and to put down the present, but rather to tell what is true to the test of time, and what is simply a passing fancy. And the only way younger people will listen to older people is if the older people are happy. Not giggly or even buoyant but joyful enough to be hopeful, to be waiting, to be ready to see and celebrate the new thing that God is doing now.

Simeon was guided to the temple on this day and as soon as he saw the boy Jesus, he embraced him and praised God saying, “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, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Anna, also of great age, steps forward to confirm what Simeon is saying. The elders agree: this is the One for whom we have been waiting.

It has taken all ages of humankind to bring this day to pass. A young couple to bear and to bring, an infant born, a couple of old folks with eyes to see and voices to proclaim. But the message begins to seep through: the Messiah has come.

All because of being there. –from LectionAid, Vol. 8, no. 1. Dec., Jan. & Feb., 1999-2000