

“Do the Rite Thing”

Welcome to the morning after. I feel old saying it, but some years ago I discovered that I prefer waking up on New Year’s Day alert and refreshed. It’s always a wonderfully quiet morning, and today I feel privileged to share some of it with you. The typical New Year’s bowl games aren’t even on until tomorrow: so today is sort of a bonus day to celebrate and to cogitate. New Year’s Day always feels like a clean slate: a fresh opportunity to ask ourselves how we might like our lives to be different.

In that regard I find myself thinking about the place of ritual in our lives... mostly in response to the rather curious scripture lesson for this morning. The topic is the circumcision and dedication of Jesus.

This is not the sort of thing they write Christmas carols about. But I find it extraordinary that Luke bothers to tell us that before Mary and Joseph went back home to Nazareth they stopped off in Jerusalem to fulfill a requirement of the religious law. They did what the parents of firstborn sons are supposed to do on the eighth day.

Luke’s telling of this story raises almost as many questions as it answers. It doesn’t square perfectly with what we know of Jewish religious law. Jesus’ circumcision marks him, literally and figuratively, as a part of the covenant people of Israel: that’s pretty clear. But the law also provided that the firstborn male of every household should be dedicated to God as a remembrance of the exodus from Egypt. If you remember that story and the succession of plagues leading up to Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea, the last of the plagues was the death of the firstborn. The Israelites were spared when they sacrificed a lamb and painted the lintel and doorposts of their homes with the blood, so that they would be passed over by the angel of death.

Since God had spared the firstborn of the Israelites, it became the law for each family to offer their firstborn son to God’s service; or alternatively to redeem him from that obligation by paying five shekels of silver.¹ It is not clear whether Luke, a non-Jew, knows about the redemption part of the law. In any event, as Luke portrays them, Mary and Joseph didn’t have five

¹ See Exodus 13:1-2, 11-16.

shekels of silver. Perhaps Luke wants us to understand that Jesus was *not* redeemed, that he remained consecrated to God.

Another ritual attendant to childbirth concerned the purification of the mother. She was ritually unclean for seven days, and underwent a thirty-three day process of purification. After this time a sacrifice was to be offered—a lamb and a pigeon or a turtledove. If the family were poor, two pigeons or two turtledoves would do. There is no mention of partridges or pear trees. Luke underscores the poverty of Mary and Joseph by omitting mention of a lamb.

These details of the story may be significant, but the real meaning lies in the simple fact that Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem to perform the expected rituals. Luke's summary remark is this, "When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth."

But something extraordinary happens to Mary, Joseph and Jesus while they are in Jerusalem. It is because they bother to observe the timeless rituals of their people that they receive a surprise—blessings from two strangers, Simeon and Anna.

Simeon is an old man to whom God has promised that before he dies he will see the Lord's Messiah; and so he waits in Jerusalem and presumably takes notice of every male child brought to the Temple for circumcision. Simeon is righteous and devout, one who follows the law and attends to prayer. When he sees Jesus he knows that this is the Chosen One. We don't know how he knows... he just knows. He takes up the baby Jesus and praises God in words that we sometimes hear as a benediction called the *Nunc Dimittis*, so named for the first two words of the Latin version.

As far as poetry goes, I prefer the King James: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word. For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." Simeon has seen the Messiah. His life is complete. He is ready to die, for the child he holds in his hands is the fulfillment of God's promises.

This would be a strange experience for parents, but Mary and Joseph have been through this before. The shepherds who had received glad tidings of great joy from angels had also told wondrous things about the child. And now it's happening again, in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph are "amazed," the same word that describes the most frequent response to Jesus' miracles.

Simeon continues with his prophetic outpouring, echoing some language from the *Magnificat*, Mary's earlier song of praise in Luke, as he says that, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel..." Jesus will be controversial, "a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed..." And isn't that the way of Jesus: he reveals us to ourselves. And finally Simeon says ominously to Mary, "and a sword shall pierce your own soul too." This foreshadows how Mary will suffer at the time of Jesus' passion. All in all, it's quite a message from Simeon, the full import of which will not be evident until the whole story has been told.

Another prophet is present, too. Her name is Anna. She, "never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day." She is 84 years old. And suddenly she too begins to "praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

It's a curious succession of events. Mary and Joseph are going through the motions of doing what they're supposed to do, and through it they receive an unscripted blessing they could never have foreseen. That's the way rituals work.

At their worst, of course, rituals reduce religious practice to a series of rote exercises, a fixed formula that precludes all spontaneity. But at their best, rituals create an opportunity: opening channels for the spirit that we would never encounter any other way.

We know that God is a part of every moment of every day; so in that sense we shouldn't need special occasions to become aware of God's presence. But the reality is that we are often so preoccupied with daily events that we become oblivious to everything except the crush of our own agendas. Ritual creates a break in time, makes a space for awareness of the eternal, presents the possibility of a pause of attentiveness. Today's lesson makes a case for the place and importance of ritual in our daily lives.

I know: family rituals don't create intimacy... but they do provide opportunity for its expression. What are birthdays but occasions to celebrate the fact that our loved ones exist, to create an excuse and an opportunity to appreciate someone? What are anniversaries but occasions to stop to recall what perhaps we daily take for granted?

Similarly, regular devotional time doesn't buy God's favor or help us amass enough points to redeem for a new toaster or for avoiding the next close call on the freeway or bypassing several thousand years in purgatory.

But devotional practice does set aside some time for connection, and helps us remain mindful of the presence of God in our lives.

Then there's worship. Goodness knows that some Saturday or Sunday services may occasionally fall just a teensy bit short of being magical. But there's almost always something here that reminds us of God: the Scripture lesson, or the music, or a phrase from one of the hymns; or maybe just the sound of children's voices saying the Lord's Prayer; or the way the sun comes through one of the windows that we had never noticed before. There's almost always something to take away... but not if you stay home.

And then there are the times when it seems as though worship is just for you, as though somebody has been reading your diary and a message hits you right between the eyes and makes a connection that goes through you like a bolt of lightning. That *certainly* doesn't happen if you're not here. In the midst of the ritual, here comes the unexpected blessing.

Not so long ago I was talking with a man who was distressed that he and his family don't seem to know how to talk with each other about what truly matters to them. This was particularly poignant at Thanksgiving when he wanted to use the meal as an opportunity to really connect. He wanted to ask everybody to pray together in a way that would be unforced and genuine—perhaps something like the ritual I once mentioned of going around the table and having everyone share something they're grateful for. But he couldn't bring himself to ask. Because they had never done that, they had no shared vocabulary of spiritual intimacy, no place to begin, no vehicle.

R. Alan Culpepper, in commenting on today's lesson says that we need, "... to find effective rituals for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary. We need to learn to greet the morning with gratitude; to celebrate the goodness of food, family and friendship at meals; to recognize mystery in beauty; and to mark rites of passage."²

So true. That's a central purpose of the Stepping Stones program here at Plymouth Church: to give families ways to mark rites of passage in the lives of their children, beginning at birth and extending through the end of high school. Along the way we observe baptism, becoming a toddler (perambulation), the beginning of kindergarten, getting a Bible in third grade, learning about communion, the beginning of adolescence, Confirmation, and graduation.

² R. Alan Culpepper in *Luke*, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary series. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995, pp. 74-75.

We mark those special events—those Faith Stepping Stones—through a series of gatherings with other parents and children who are at the same point in the journey. But just as importantly we teach a daily bedtime ritual for families. It starts out very simply in infancy with a blessing of the child as we put him or her to bed. When they get a bit older and are more verbal, a simple prayer is added. After the next Stepping Stone we add a brief discussion of the day’s highs and lows. Then we add a Bible verse, after they have their Bibles. Then we add practice in giving and receiving forgiveness—this before entering adolescence. And all of it takes place in a simple, brief ritual, usually at the end of the day.

Lots of days nothing earthshattering is shared. But some days there are really important things to talk about, to laugh and cry about, to pray about... and there, just when we need it the most, is a vehicle. Ritual does that.

The Bible tells us that Mary and Joseph very deliberately raised their son Jesus with a life rich in ritual, so that he would know the traditions of his people; and, more importantly, so that he would know that God was a part of every moment of his life.

We can do the same, by attending to the place of ritual in our lives. May you have a New Year that is rich in blessing, rich in meaning, and rich in ritual.

Amen

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