

Blessings! And Good-bye to the Congregation of Trinity Durham *Based on Luke 2: 22-40*

Today we heard the story of Jesus being presented to God, at the temple. Now, according to the Law, the first born male child is dedicated to God. And we know that Mary and Joseph are aware of the specialness of this baby, the angels have told them so. And being good law-abiding Jews, they of course bring him to the Temple for the presentation ceremony, and how very appropriate, especially for this child. And they also bring a pair of birds with them for the sacrifice. Ideally a lamb is to be given as the offering, as per the laws outlined in the book of Leviticus, but those who can't afford a lamb can bring a pair of birds. Birds were the poor-people's offering.

Interestingly, they are met at the Temple by an elderly gent named Simeon. Simeon was not one of the temple priests or a even a rabbi, but a holy man who was guided by the Spirit of God to meet the new little family there. God had promised Simeon he would see the Messiah before he would die, and Simeon had been waiting for this special moment. And when the time for the dedication ceremony at the Temple actually came around, it was Simeon who takes the baby into his arms, gives praise to God and announces to anyone present that this child, Jesus is the Messiah, a light for revelation for Gentiles and the people of Israel -- much to the parents' amazement. Maybe they were wondering how Simeon knew too? Then Simeon blesses both Mary and Joseph, and makes yet another pronouncement to Mary—a prophecy of sorts -- her child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and this will cause her much pain and heartache—'pierce her soul' are the words used, that's deep pain. And to top it off, an ancient holy woman, Anna, is there as well, also proclaiming this baby as the one who would redeem Jerusalem. What an overwhelming experience this must have been for all who were there, not the expected dedication ceremony of a male child at the Temple.

This is a very special family, which is, I know, a statement of the obvious! Mary and Joseph were blessed by God for an extraordinarily unique role—parenting the Son of God. They've both been visited by the Archangel Gabriel with messages from God about this baby's coming before he was born. A host of angels praised God at the birth of this boy-child, and now at this presentation ceremony, again they are again blessed, by Simeon and Anna – not heavenly messengers, but this time by earthly agents of God, I suppose we could call them. A man and a woman, recognized holy people, publicly validated the messages of the angels, reinforcing the angels' messages about how extraordinary this boy-child is. This poor, unassuming couple is blessed, chosen by God for this role, to bear and raise the Messiah. They have been favoured by God. This family is well and truly blessed. It got me thinking about what it means to be blessed by God, got me thinking about how we think about being blessed by God. What do you think of when you think of blessings?

We say we're blessed if we have things—like good health, if we have children and/or grandchildren, a loving family and friends around us. And no doubt about it, those are wonderful things! We also think we're blessed if we have the things that a solid financial base brings us – and we work hard to get them: a nice home, good clothes, a good car or even better two, exotic vacations -- just generally being financially well off – all the blessings of 'good' life, right? And the logical course of thought with this is that if we have all these blessings, all the 'good' things in life. And we're deserving of them, because we have worked for them, and been favoured by God. Here's a view point I'd like you to consider. It's from a Lutheran biblical scholar and commentator Karoline Lewis:

“... God knows humanity all too well. That if we sit in blessing too long, ignoring its accountabilities and responsibilities, keeping it all to ourselves, it too easily becomes blessing without responsibility, without

implications, and without urgency. And, it too easily becomes blessing that is believed to be deserved, blessing that is perceived to be earned and entitled, and blessing that is celebrated as reward.”¹

And then the juxtaposition of our way of thinking about having blessings versus God’s blessings on the Holy family struck me. This couple’s baby was born in a barn, for heaven’s sake! They didn’t have 2 pennies to rub together. They had to present pigeons as their temple sacrifice. And their lives were anything but easy, hardly what we’d call ‘the good life’. They are exiled from their home, flee the persecution of Herod’s wrath—he was threatened by this Prince of Peace, he wanted to kill their special child. Jesus’ career was that of an itinerant rabbi, wandering about preaching, dependent upon others for food and clothing and he ended up crucified. Mary watched her son die as a political insurrectionist, and she became the mother of one who was outcast from her own community, her life must have become more difficult as she aged. And Joseph—well we’re not sure what happened to him. He just kind of faded into the wood work (pun not really intended!) Their lives don’t seem to fit our idea of what it means to be blessed by God, do they?

So I reflected upon this for a bit; thinking on what God’s blessing really is, and who is blessed, and how. And it reminded me of the Beatitudes—you, know blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. And we see that God blesses the persecuted, the humble, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for justice, God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for God ... God’s blessings, it seems, come upon those who are most in need, financially, emotionally, spiritually, those who struggle to do God’s work. God’s blessing comes upon those who are aware of their need for God.

And when our blessings become tied to all the things we have, things we’ve accumulated, purchased, earned, worked for, when we have all that we have, think we know all that we need to know, and feel that these are God’s blessings, we’re just filled up with, well, ourselves. And there-in lies the problem. Why? Because when we are full of ourselves, and our own sense of entitlement, our self-righteousness, we don’t really truly think we need God. And we stop really praying, and listening to the Spirit’s guidance. And when we stop listening to God, stop needing God and listening to the Spirit, we go our own way, not God’s desired way for us. It happens to individuals, and the institutions people create when they get together—even Churches! And when that happens, it is the beginning of ‘our fall’. The bible is replete with stories about God’s people going their own way, not needing or wanting God, or following God—beginning with the fall of Adam and Eve and then all the other accounts of the troubles of Israelite and Hebrew people throughout the Old Testament when they stopped listening to God. That’s why Jesus came to earth, to show us the way back. Simeon said it in our gospel story today. “This child is destined to the falling and rising of many... (vs 35). That is the way it is with Jesus, the resurrection story, after the fall, the rising again. It is the very backbone of our Christian faith. In Christ, we rise again. When we are open to the Lord’s call to us, listen to the way the Lord is calling, respond to the Lord’s call, we walk in the Light of the Lord. That is the blessing. The Lord goes with us when we do the Lord’s work. The Lord will provide when we do God’s work. I honestly don’t know how often I have said these words to you in the last 7 ½ years, and if you remember nothing else of my being with you, do remember this. The Lord goes with us when we do the Lord’s work. And the Lord will provide when we do God’s work, and provide abundantly. What it brings, where God is leading us is the unknown. I suspect neither Mary nor Joseph knew what their futures would bring when Mary said to Gabriel—‘Let it be for me as God wills’, and when Joseph did as the angel said and did not walk away from his engagement to a woman pregnant with a child that was not his.

¹ Karoline Lewis in “Blessing and Opposition” from her Dear Working Preacher column for Tuesday Dec. 26.17
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5035>. Accessed Dec. 27, 17

The future for both St. James and Trinity is an unknown. This is new territory for each of you, separating from decades as sister parishes. And it is uncertain where this change will bring each congregation. And uncertainty is not always a comfortable place to live. But of this I am certain, there will be struggles and challenges, you will be called to change and adapt and find the new way God is leading you to do the work of God's kingdom in your corner of God's world. This is yet another opportunity to respond to God's call for each congregation. For people who do not like change, who refuse to look to change, it is like closing the door to God. Do remember, it is in the struggles, the uncertainty, the vulnerability of discomfort that we find God, it is then that we are open to God's true blessings, God's presence to us. When Jesus was questioned by the temple authorities when he was hanging out with the less than desirables of society, eating and drinking with outcasts and sinners, and his response to them was: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call, not the righteous but sinners." (Mark2: 17) The righteous don't think they need God, they're doing just fine on their own, thank you very much, they're so of themselves and their sense of knowing what's right, they don't have any room left for the Spirit's grace.

So, be open to the call of the Lord—wherever that call may lead. Pray for the Lord's guidance, individually and collectively as a congregation, and then listen. The direction you are called to may surprise you, may take you places you never thought you'd go, or take you on a different course that you thought you were supposed to go, maybe even wanted to go. Each of you will have a role in the future of your church. It takes everyone, using the time, talents and treasures God has given you. These next few years are critical for the future of our churches; everyone needs to be committed, and to take an active role for our church to not just survive, but thrive.

And now I thank you for 7 and ½ years of ministry in this place, for allowing me the privilege of being your pastor and priest, for your compassion and care when my dad died this year. Thank you for your patience in the first year or so, as I learned the role of ministry as an ordained leader. God is calling me to a new ministry, in new places, an opportunity to do ministry closer to home. The hardest part of leaving a place is saying the goodbyes.

And, if I give you my blessing. May the peace of God, which truly does surpass our understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge of God, and full of the love of God's son Jesus, the Christ. And with the Holy Spirit leading us, we really can do more than we could ever ask or imagine. Amen.