

Christmas 1 B 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 31, 2017

Luke 2:22-40

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

On the seventh day of Christmas, my true love gave to me seven swans a swimming. Actually, the gospel reading today is also assigned to the 40th Day of Christmas– which Lutherans call “The Presentation of Our Lord” and Roman Catholics refer to as “The Purification of the Virgin.” And in parts of Europe is sometimes called “Candlemas.” And in the United States is called “Groundhog Day.”

There are parts of the Christian world where there are not just 12 days of Christmas, but 40 days of Christmas, extending to what we now call February 2nd, based on today’s gospel reading. Some people leave their decorations up for forty days.

The very first three verses of this Christmas story are each important. *“When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses.”* According to the Law of Moses– this indicates that Mary and Joseph were very good, observant Jews. And as we always see throughout the Advent season in preparation for Christmas the coming of Jesus is deeply rooted in Old Testament hopes and expectations. *“When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses”*– this is the purification of the mother after childbirth. This is why Roman Catholics call February 2nd “The Purification of the Virgin.” Leviticus chapter 12. After childbirth, the mother is ceremonially unclean for seven days. And then there is a cleansing period of an additional 33 days before she can go into a place like the Temple. A total of 40 days. This is part of the very cautious attitude– perhaps reverent, perhaps fearful, attitude– taken toward blood in the Law of Moses. That’s where we get the forty days. If Jesus really was born on December 25, then this might very well have taken place on February 2nd.

That’s the first verse of today’s gospel In the second verse, it says: As it is written in the law of the Lord, *“Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord.”* This is a separate regulation, from Exodus. Every firstborn male of any species– human or donkey or sheep– was supposed to be presented to God as a symbolic offering. A reversal of the Passover. In which all of the firstborn male children AND animals in Egypt were slain. So when Mary, Joseph, and Jesus go to the Temple, they are complying with two separate aspects of the Law given to Moses. One pertains to Mary’s ritual status after childbirth. And one pertains to Jesus’s status as a firstborn. When Roman Catholics call February 2nd the Purification of the Virgin, they demonstrate a focus on Mary. When Lutherans call February 2nd the Presentation of Our Lord, they demonstrate a focus upon the status of Jesus. But in fact both aspects of the story are true.

And the third verse in today's gospel: *"They offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'"* This is also from Leviticus. But it indicates that they were poor. The designated offering was a lamb. But if you were poor, there was a clause for poverty in the Law of Moses, and you were allowed to give the two birds instead. Collectively, the first three verses demonstrate something important about Jesus. That he was raised in a very devout family. And that he was raised in a very poor family.

At the temple, the family meets two important characters. We had the opportunity to talk about one of them, Anna, during Advent, on December 10. Anna is a transliteration of Hannah, and Hannah's song forms the background of Mary's song, the Magnificat. And Anna is also a woman. She represents something distinctively important— a prophetess— and so she is a remarkable character who represents significant connections to the past and to the future.

The other character that the family meets is Simeon. And Simeon gives us the fourth of the four songs that come from the first two chapters of Luke, the Advent and Christmas season. There is the song of Mary, commonly called the *Magnificat*. There is the song of Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. There is the song of the angels on Christmas Eve— "Glory to God in the highest." And there is Simeon's song. *"Lord, now you let your servant go in peace."*

As we said back on December 10, Mary's song would be sung by devout Christians at evening prayer. But now we can fill in the chart. Mary's song would be sung at evening prayer. Zechariah's song would be sung at morning prayer. The angel's song, "Glory to God in the Highest" would be sung on Sunday. And Simeon's song would be sung at bedtime— a service sometimes called *Compline*— a service which begins on page 320 in our current worship book. The idea of resting in peace is invoked at bedtime. And by pastors like me at the time of death. Simeon's song can be used— should be used, if at all possible— as a prayer after a person takes their last breath.

*"Master, 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."*

That's a very rich text. One of the many things that it does is to catapult what has so far been an extremely Jewish story— as we have seen these last weeks— this ultra-Jewish story is now catapulted toward a universal horizon. From the Jews to the Gentiles.

As I said, Simeon's words are musical, and this is the fourth of four songs from Luke, which together frame an entire lifestyle of Christian spirituality, and of course, lay a foundation for sacred singing in the life of the Church.

When I became a Lutheran in the 1980's it was common for us to sing Simeon's words

at the end of communion. I had been raised as a Presbyterian. Communion was very different when I came into the Lutheran churches. Presbyterians take communion sitting in the pews. Lutherans go up to the altar. Presbyterians use many, many little glasses. Most of the Lutherans where I worshiped used a chalice or two. And one of the other things that was different was that Lutherans sometimes sang, “Lord, now you let your servant go in peace.” In those days, some of you may have experienced this, there was a song called “Thank the Lord and sing his praise,” which was a song that was sometimes used after communion. And where I was, the Lutherans alternated it sometimes with “Lord, now you let your servant go in peace.”

And I thought, what could be more Lutheran than this practice of using Simeon’s words after communion. A strong affirmation of the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. “I’ve seen salvation, I’ve touched it,” Simeon basically testifies. “And now I can go in peace.” And so it is that we have met Christ in bread and wine, we’ve touched and tasted his goodness, and we can go forth in peace. Go in peace. Serve the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Although Lutherans often end the communion with Simeon’s words, often in song, Episcopalians also frequently use the words of Simeon after communion, often in the form of a prayer. So I thought, “How Lutheran.” Or maybe even, “How Anglican.” But it turns out that the choice to use Simeon’s words after communion comes from John Calvin, and his church in Geneva. So ironically, Calvin created this practice. That isn’t used by Calvinists. But is well used by many Lutherans and Anglicans.

Anyway, Simeon’s song– the fourth of the four great songs, or canticles, of Luke– is often used as a punctuation point. At the end of the day, at bedtime, for traditional Christians. At the end of communion, in some churches. At the end of life, for many who die as Christians. At the end of the forty days of Christmas, on February 2nd. And today, by happenstance, at the end of the calendar year. Our light has come. A light we have beheld with our own eyes. And a light that promises to be for all people. With that thought in mind, we can say goodbye to 2017. The good and the bad. We can depart in peace. Knowing that history and our lives are in the hands of this God who has come to us as a baby in Bethlehem. Amen.