

## Where Are You Growing?

Luke 2:21-38; 39-52

Crossroads Christian Church

Christmas 1

Caseyville, IL

Dec. 27, 2015

It's the Sunday after Christmas. We lit candles and shared communion and sang Silent Night on Christmas Eve. We unwrapped presents, and many of them still work. Many of us gathered for Christmas dinner with family and friends, and maybe sneaked in a nap afterwards. But it's still Christmas. We're still celebrating the wonderful gift of Jesus Christ coming to us as a child. We're ringing our bells to show our joy.

Timothy Haut is a pastor and poet whose works I really love. His poem celebrates the wonder of the season.

### WONDER

Walking under stars,  
I am held by the deep night  
and wonder  
that the world can be so quiet,  
so gentle,  
so good.  
I have become hard,  
battered by grim news, loss,  
the noise of many fears.  
Once I was a child,  
who watched wide-eyed  
in candle's golden light  
as my father's hand  
set tiny shepherds in a toy stable  
where a baby was.  
Can I make a place for that infant, still,  
come to the quiet,  
and believe?<sup>1</sup>

Isn't it wonderful how the stories of Christ's birth keep going back to that theme of light in the darkness—angels appearing to the shepherds at night, singing glory to God in the Highest; wise men following the star by night; a baby being born in the dark, dark stable?

So, in this dark time of year we who are Christians can hold fast to that light. God didn't magically erase all darkness, but God came as a light so we wouldn't be huddled in the dark alone. And this light that

---

<sup>1</sup> Timothy Haut, posted on Midrash.com.

first shone in Bethlehem would grow up to tell us, "you are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:13-16) Christ came to share the light of God's love, so we could light the way to others.

In Luke's Gospel, after the visits from the shepherds, with their rumors of angels, Luke records that Mary "treasured these words and pondered them in her heart."

Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus to the temple, six weeks after his birth. We could roughly compare it to a service of infant dedication that we still celebrate today. In the Jewish tradition, a mother would be pronounced ritually clean after the blood of childbirth. The purification ceremony required a sacrifice of a lamb or a pigeon, except in cases of poverty, where two pigeons or doves could be substituted. That was what Mary offered—the sacrifice of a poor person. Also, a firstborn son was always dedicated to God. Remember how Hannah dedicated her baby Samuel to God's service? Usually a firstborn son was dedicated to God and redeemed back by an offering of five shekels. Then the child would be restored to his regular role in the family. Luke doesn't mention about that offering being paid, so maybe he was indicating that the baby Jesus continued to belong to God. Even though Luke wrote primarily to Gentiles, he always affirmed the role of the Temple and of Jewish ritual.

All that was prescribed ritual, all according to tradition. But then two unexpected things happened. Simeon was a devout old man, filled with the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, God had promised him that he would see the Messiah before he died. That Spirit guided him to the temple just as Jesus was being dedicated. In a moment filled with incredible tenderness and beauty, this old man, ready to die, held the six-week-old baby, and said that this baby would be the one who would bring peace and salvation, not just to the Jews, but to the Gentiles, as well. Simeon's dreams had been fulfilled in seeing this child. "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word,

because my eyes have seen your salvation.

You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples.

It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles

and a glory for your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

Yet, Simeon went on to say, that saving work would come at great cost. There would be a dark thread in the bright tapestry of hope. Mary would one day feel the pain of one day burying her child.

Simeon's blessing would be confirmed by another elderly spiritual guide, Anna. Anna was a widow, 84 years of age, who had the gift of prophecy. We all know of people who practically live their lives at church, Anna was that kind of person. She, too, thanked God and witnessed that this baby would be "the redemption of Jerusalem."

Fred Craddock puts it this way. "These two aged saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfilment of God's promises. And they, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, are old, ready to move offstage, to "depart in peace." God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God's keeping an old promise."<sup>2</sup>

In our second reading, twelve years later in Mary's life, she had something else to ponder—"what am I going to do with this child?" she might have said. For they were on their way back home in a pilgrim caravan after celebrating the Passover in Jerusalem, and she seemed to have misplaced her son. It takes a special kind of wisdom for any of us who are parents to remember that our children aren't really ours—they're on loan to us from God. Think of what more that might have meant to Mary—she was trying her best, along with Joseph, to raise one who was uniquely God's child, and it was time to go home from the crowded city, and he was no where to be seen! Just before this story, Luke had beautifully summarized Jesus' childhood—"The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him." (Luke 2:40) I wonder what Mary, desperately seeking her missing son, would have said to that? "Yeah, right," maybe. How could a child be so wonderful, yet so insensitive to her family, to let them worry so much?

Then they found Jesus in the temple, talking with the priests and scholars, and doctors of the law, listening to them, asking them questions, and everyone was amazed. On the way back, his parents scolded him for worrying them, and he asked "didn't you know I'd be in my father's house?" Luke didn't write what Mary might have said, "what am I ever going to do with this child?" Maybe the boy Jesus was attracted to the temple, because he was learning the Law of God, and he had all these questions, and here was his chance. At any rate, Luke offers us this wonderful glimpse into the humanity of Jesus and his

---

<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Interpretation Series, John Knox Press, 1990), p.40.

family, and gives all of us who are parents the knowledge that even the Son of God broke curfew.

Jesus had gone to the temple to live in the light of God's word, to share that light with those who knew it best. He was what we today called Bar Mitzvah'd. He had come as a boy, but had been recognized as a man as he accepted and interpreted the scriptures.

The boy Jesus and his family were experiencing growing pains in that incident at the temple. His family's patience was stretched, and Jesus grew in having the opportunity to talk about faith in a deeper way than he could have at home. And maybe Jesus grew more sensitive to the emotional needs of Mary and Joseph, too.

Jesus grew. He was divine, but he was human also. He sought out opportunities to grow in deeper understanding of his own religious tradition.

I've been talking about light and about growth. Like plants, we're made so that we grow toward the light. But unlike plants, we have a choice. We don't have to. The light of the Advent candles remind us of the light of the world, and we realize that God wants us to grow, to stretch. We're never too old to grow in our faith—look at Simeon and Anna, near the end of their earthly lives—but they were still open to growth in their faith—to see what new things the Spirit would bring. Where are you growing? What can you do in the next year to grow in your faith and mind and spirit? Maybe read the Bible more, go to Sunday School classes at the church, develop prayer habits. What ways can you help bring peace and justice to a troubled world or to your own neighborhood or family, to reach out in love and compassion? What can you do to grow in love? When you grow in love, you're growing into God. Where are you growing? Where are you growing? Only you can answer that. Amen.