

## Not Surprised

Luke 2:22-40

Today's gospel passage takes place just after the events of Jesus' birth. Luke 2:22-40 follows a series of surprising events that we call the Christmas story. Our passage is after Elizabeth and Zechariah have learned about their son John the Baptist; after Mary was visited by an Angel and learned of her impending miraculous pregnancy; after Jesus was born in Bethlehem; and after angels appeared to shepherds, singing and shining in God's glory...Following those events, Mary and Joseph leave Bethlehem and travel to Jerusalem to complete the religious rituals which were to accompany the birth of a firstborn child. This is where our passage picks up the story.

From what we read in the gospels, Mary and Joseph are clearly observant and pious Jews. Luke says several times that they acted "according to the law of Moses" or "the law of the Lord" (Luke 2:22, 23, 24). We see Mary and Joseph enter the Temple in Jerusalem in order to offer the specified animals for the ritual sacrifice: two turtledoves or pigeons.

Holding the infant Jesus, Mary and Joseph are walking through the temple when an old man named Simeon approaches them. Simeon picks up the baby Jesus from his parents' arms, lifts him up, "and praises God, saying, 'Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel'" (vv. 28-32).

Mary and Joseph marvel or are surprised by this sudden declaration and prophecy over their newborn child. By definition, a surprise is "an unexpected or astonishing event, fact, or thing". In some ways, it's a bit strange that Mary and Joseph are amazed. Scripture doesn't tell us exactly how Jesus' parents had been processing the series of truly surprising events which had already occurred: the virgin birth; angels, shepherds; and three astronomers offering expensive royal gifts to their child. Perhaps Mary and Joseph thought that the praising, the angels, and the pronouncements of kingship would in time

just pass or fade away. Yet this current event happens in Jerusalem of all places, the center of the Jewish faith. Mary and Joseph are startled by Simeon's proclamation and praise.

Let's stop and ponder the chaos and the beauty of this temple scene...Mary and Joseph humbly come to Jerusalem to fulfill the rituals of their faith and to offer their simple offering (which was really a poor person's offering). They enter the temple and then two older folks - Simeon and then Anna - start exclaiming praises about their infant child.

Consider the image of a wrinkled, crooked old gentleman picking up baby Christ, picking up baby God incarnate, and praising the name of Yahweh. And the image of Anna, an old, childless lady, devout in prayer and fasting, catching a glimpse of the Christ child and proceeding to declare the Good News to anyone who will listen - the perplexing news that God's Messiah had come in the form of a little baby who would soon head home to small, insignificant Nazareth (Nathanael who once asked, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" John 1:46). In this passage, the old are not irrelevant or insignificant. It is they who finally see the fulfillment of the prophecies that all have awaited.

As I was studying this passage something came to me that I had not noticed before. While Mary and Joseph are amazed at Simeon's words...Simeon himself is not surprised to see the Messiah come to the temple as an infant. Not surprised?!...

When we hear someone say, "I'm not surprised," it's usually not in response to a miraculous event - which would be, by definition...surprising! When people say, "I'm not surprised," the lack of amazement is typically because expectations weren't high to begin with. "I'm not surprised..." that communicates there was already something signaling failure or disappointment. For instance, someone might say, "I'm not surprised that she flunked out of school, with as little homework she did". Or, "I'm not surprised that he had a car accident because of his recklessness in other areas of life" ... To me, it seems like we

only use the phrase “not surprised” to somehow buffer or explain a disappointing or negative circumstance.

However, Simeon’s lack of surprise comes in a significantly different setting. While these words aren’t explicitly mentioned by Luke to describe the scene, it is clear that Simeon is not awestruck or amazed to see the infant Messiah at the temple in Jerusalem...He’s been expecting this moment for some time and knows exactly what to do when it comes... praise God for keeping His promises. Luke says that Simeon had been “looking forward to the consolation of Israel” (v. 25). Hundreds of years before, through the Hebrew prophets like Isaiah, Micah, and others, the LORD had promised to send a Messiah. This Messiah would be a righteous ruler, one who would bring reconciliation to the Israelites’ relationship with YHWH and who would extend the LORD’s renewal and deliverance to all nations and all of creation.

In our passage, Simeon is not surprised because he was familiar with the words of the prophets, Isaiah and others, who spoke of this righteous ruler to come. Most of all, Simeon is not surprised because he is familiar with who the LORD had revealed Himself to be.

From the time of the Patriarchs - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to the slavery in Egypt and the Exodus; to the entry and settlement of the Promised Land; to King David; and to the prophets, the LORD revealed Himself to be a God who kept His promises. Yahweh is the God who works out His plan of redemption by using the weak and the lowly. Yahweh is the God who transforms broken people into agents of God’s Kingdom. Whether a foreign prostitute like Rahab or an adulterous King like David or any other person, God is eager to work through those whom the world might disregard.

Time and time again, the LORD had been faithful to Israel - and remembering this faithfulness guided Simeon’s hope. Even though it had been 400 years since the last

prophet had spoken in Israel, even though there was a Roman army occupying the land of Israel, Simeon was living in eager expectation that the promised Messiah would come. Simeon is not surprised...because he trusts that God will be faithful. His hope rests in the nature and deeds of Yahweh. Simeon has faith, he acts out his faith in expectation by coming to the temple, and praises God when his hope (and his people's hope) is finally fulfilled.

Who is the LORD, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?...He is the One who has acted, time and time again, to deliver, to send, to save. Yahweh is the One who fulfills that which seems impossible - and He does it for us, in us, and often through us. Simeon knew the deeds of the LORD, what Yahweh had done in Scripture, and what the Holy Spirit was currently revealing. Simeon knew the nature and character of Yahweh - and so he wasn't surprised to see God come through exactly as He had promised.

Looking to the New Year, I think that Simeon should be our own model. Can we be like Simeon...can we hopefully expect that God will again act in mighty and unexpected ways? Like Simeon, can we learn and remind ourselves of the great deeds that the LORD has done in the past, both in salvation history, and in our own lives? Can we also look forward in eager expectation for what God will do in the future...and not be surprised at how faithful and how thorough the LORD will be? Can we eagerly hope and pray and act for God's renewal in our lives, in this church, in our neighborhood, and in this world?

How are you asking God to act in 2024? Perhaps you are praying for a relationship to be restored, even though it seems pretty much impossible right now. Maybe you are praying for joy, for God to take away the burdens and the sorrows that sap your energy and keep you from rejoicing in God's presence. Perhaps you seek wisdom on how to serve, you are looking for God to reveal what opportunities are next. Or you might be looking to honor

God through your heart, soul, mind, and body. Perhaps you are praying for spiritual renewal...your own, and for this congregation.

Sisters and brothers, Jesus is real, and He is faithful, and He will lead us through as we seek Him. If we hope and pray and act in faith, I am sure that we won't be surprised at just how faithful God will be! AMEN.