

Holy Traditions
A Sermon on Luke 2:21-40
First Sunday After Christmas
December 31, 2017

Introduction

We like to think we are non-conformists. We are free thinkers. We want to express our freedom from authority and from customs of the past that restrict us.

I saw it Friday night when I went to a Thunder game. A young man sitting a few rows behind me was wearing shorts. It was about 20 degrees outside. Kaitlyn is the same way. She refuses to wear a coat when she goes outside in winter. “I don’t need a coat. I only have to make it to the car.”

Many reformers in church want to go back to the New Testament church, as if nothing in the tradition of the nearly 2,000 years since then is of any value. Progressive scholars and seminary students place a high value on reason and experience but are skeptical of tradition. They believe that tradition has been unjust to women and people of color.

Luke places much higher weight on tradition. He believes that the tradition is full of wisdom. He describes Joseph and Mary as meticulously following the traditions of their Jewish ancestors. Perhaps Luke can redeem the tradition for us.

First Move: Finding God in Rituals

Today’s text focuses on three religious rituals: circumcision of a newborn male child, redemption of the firstborn male child, and purification of the mother.

Joseph and Mary had Jesus circumcised when he was eight days old. Circumcision marked the child’s acceptance into the covenant community. It gives the child an identity. Infant baptisms and baby dedications serve much the same purpose today.

Luke shows that Joseph and Mary are devout, obedient Jews. Jesus was circumcised when eight days were fulfilled. They are doing it in fulfillment of Scripture. The emphasis in the first verse is not on the circumcision but on the conferring of the name Jesus, which also was an act of fulfillment. The parents were complying with the angel Gabriel’s command in the Annunciation to Mary to name the child Jesus.

Forty days after the birth of Jesus, his parents fulfilled the command of Scripture by presenting him at the Temple and by offering sacrifices for the purification of Mary. The consecration of the firstborn male is rooted in the Passover story. Because God spared the firstborn children of the Hebrew slaves, they owed their lives to him. They are considered holy and they are to be redeemed at a price of five shekels of silver. Today's text says nothing about paying the five shekels, so Jesus was not redeemed. He remained committed to the service of the Lord, just as Samuel was. Luke draws on the story of Samuel throughout the birth story, comparing Jesus and Mary to Samuel and his mother Hannah.

After the birth of a male child, the mother was ceremonially unclean for seven days and underwent purification for 33 days (the period was twice as long for a female child). After the 40 or 80 days of purification, the mother was to offer a lamb and a pigeon. If she could not afford a lamb, she could offer instead two turtle doves or pigeons. For Joseph and Mary to offer two doves and two pigeons underscores that Jesus was born to the poor of Israel.

The holy family meets two elderly people in the courtyard at the Temple: Simeon and Anna. Luke believes that the elderly have wisdom to impart to the young.

Simeon is righteous and devout, he faithfully observes the religious customs. His hope comes from Scripture, he longs for the long-promised messiah.

His lifetime of devotion and interior work opened him up to a divine message through the holy spirit—he would not see death until he saw the messiah.

Simeon was full of the spirit when he came into the temple courtyard to meet the parents of the holy infant. The spirit again allowed him to recognize that this child was the messiah. He embraced the child in his arms and began singing a canticle, which is a religious song. It is known as the Nunc Dimittis from the first two words of the song in Latin: "Now dismiss."

The song is full of allusions to Second Isaiah, which is the second half of the book of Isaiah, chapters 40 through 66. In Isaiah 40:3-5, all flesh shall see the salvation of God. God's servant is called to be a light to the nations in Isa 42:6. Second Isaiah joyfully anticipates the restoration of the exiles to their homeland and the rebuilding of the ruined city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was intact in Jesus' day, but when Luke was written, the city was in ruins.

God's saving purpose in the Nunc Dimittis includes the Gentiles. This is new in Luke. It is an expansion of the canticle sung by the angels to the shepherds, which announces the identity of the child in terms of the expectations of Israel. The broad scope of salvation in the Nunc Dimittis is the climax of Luke's infancy narrative.

Luke has a profound sense that what is about to happen is God's doing. Simeon is in the Temple because he was guided to be there by the Spirit. Jesus' parents were there because they were fulfilling the requirements of the Law.

Simeon anticipates the opposition that Jesus will face. He tells Mary that the child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel. Luke also anticipates the rejection of the Christian mission to Israel as described in the Acts of the Apostles. Early Christians expressed the same thought with the image of the building stone: it is the cornerstone upon which a house can be built, and it is a stumbling block for others.

Anna is standing nearby, watching the Holy Family with Simeon. She is a prophetess, continuing the tradition of female prophets such as Miriam, Deborah and Judith in the Old Testament. She anticipates the role of female prophets in the early church.

Anna's words are not recorded. Luke instead emphasizes her character and piety. Luke intends that her widowhood devoted to worship, prayer and fasting should have its own eloquence. This life opened her to the spirit of prophecy.

Following their meeting with Simeon and Anna in the Temple, the parents return home to the ordinary circumstances of their lives.

Second Move: Embracing the Wisdom of the Past

The observance of religious requirements and rituals has fallen on hard times. So says Alan Culpepper, a Southern Baptist scholar. [I cannot believe that I am quoting a Southern Baptist scholar.] For many people, religious rituals are reduced to attending church on Christmas Eve and Easter and to having weddings and funerals in church. The marking of daily and special events with rituals that recognize the sacredness of life and the presence of God in the everyday are practically extinct. In the minds of many, it is associated with superstitions and cultic practices of the past. The result: God has receded from the awareness and experience of everyday life.

Christians today like to think of Jesus as an iconoclast, beginning a new religion. That is not true to the gospel's portrait of Jesus. Jesus followed tradition except when it was literalized and legalized.

Ritual observances had a well-established place in Judaism in Jesus' day and in Christian devotion from the early days through the Middle Ages. The Reformation rejected many of the ritual expressions of faith as too Catholic.

Are we really that smart that we can reject all the wisdom of the past? We are not old enough as a species to have developed more native intelligence than our ancestors. Plato would still be the smartest guy in the room, or on the planet. People

today have read more books and have more knowledge than Jesus or Gandhi. Yet we are not as wise.

By abandoning rituals and tradition, we have diminished and impoverished our experiences in daily life. They have no meaning beyond themselves, no opening to transcendence. Little room for mystery remains in the everyday as it becomes increasingly subject to secularism and technology.

The challenge to modern Christians is to find effective rituals for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary. Joseph, Mary, Simeon and Anna saw God at work in events they had experienced.

Diana Butler Bass has studied mainline churches that are thriving even during the decline in church membership in the last 40 years; she says that vital churches help their members connect spirituality and tradition. People want Bible, prayer and worship. A congregation grows when it draws its worldview and practices from Scripture and tradition instead of from the culture. Churches need to be spiritual and religious.

In her first best-selling book, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, Bass uses the metaphor of pilgrims on a journey. Christian practices are signposts on our journey that lead to God. The signposts are practices drawn from tradition that we do together in community. Our ancestors in faith have marked the Christian path for us.

Bass describes ten spiritual practices that vital congregations have discovered from the riches of the Christian past: hospitality, discernment, healing, contemplation, testimony, diversity, justice, worship, reflection and beauty. I would like to address just one of those practices: discernment.

People are obsessed with politics today. That is our new national religion. It shapes the way people think. Everybody has something to say and few people listen. In Washington, words are not about truth, they are about power. Words are weapons on social media. Words are about getting other people to submit to the speaker's view of reality.

Discernment is about silence and listening. These are deeply counter cultural acts. Discernment often takes the form of questions such as, Who am I? What does God want me to do with my life? Where is God in the midst of all this?

Discernment is about asking God questions instead of I questions. God questions help us distinguish the spirit of God from the other spirits at work in the world. God questions shift our focus from what we are doing to what God is doing. They help us understand how we fit in God's story.

Simeon and Anna were practicing discernment. Simeon is righteous and devout. Being righteous means being in right relationship with God. Simeon has tried

to align his life with God. Being devout means that he faithfully observes religious practices. God's hope has become his hope—that a Messiah will come to lead Israel back to God.

Anna was a widow. 1 Timothy 5 describes what widows were like in Paul's churches. The church supported widows who were 60 years old and had been married only once. The widow sets her hope on God and prays night and day. She is well attested for her good works, as one who has brought up children, shown hospitality, washed the saints' feet, helped the afflicted and devoted herself to doing good in every way.

Simeon and Anna have wisdom to share. They have practiced discernment and devoted themselves to God. Their communion with God has allowed them to recognize the true nature of the baby Jesus.

Conclusion

If you really want to be a non-conformist, make discernment part of your daily life. Work quiet time and prayer into your daily routine.

If we as a congregation want to practice discernment, we can ask, where is God in our ministry? Where is God leading us?

“Mainline renewal is not rocket science,” a Lutheran pastor told Bass. “You preach the gospel, offer hospitality and pay attention to worship and people's spiritual lives. Frankly, you take Christianity seriously as a way of life.”

Holy traditions can help. They embody the wisdom of the past. The saints who came before us have marked the way for us.

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