

During Advent and Christmas the first couple chapters of the Gospel of Luke are usually read in short passages as if they were “weekly installments” or episodes in the story of the birth of Jesus. So today we pick up the story right where we left it on Christmas Eve in chapter two. As you might recall, verse 20 reads: “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” And then the Gospel of Luke takes a week off! Because verse 21 reads: “When the eighth day arrived, the day of circumcision, the child was named Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived.” And then about three more weeks zip by, because verse 22 reads: “Then when the days stipulated by Moses for purification were complete, they took him up to Jerusalem to offer him to God”! So, yes, in some regards time seems to fly in the Gospel of Luke – but for us, only a couple of days have gone by! Please try to keep up!

What’s going on at the temple generally baffles those of us who aren’t familiar with these religious practices of dedicating the first born male child to God, and also offering a sacrifice. We typically don’t see couples coming to worship with a baby and a pair of doves or two young pigeons, do we? No, we don’t. Nor do we incorporate the sacrificing of birds or animals into our worship services. And I think it stretches our imaginations to picture a worship space that is large enough for all that to be taking place – as well as having space for people like Simeon and Anna who come and worship and pray every day. So we need to work at thinking about the temple as being a very big and busy place with many different things happening in different areas at the same time. And it might have seemed like just a blur of activity to Mary and Joseph who were trying to find the right place to be, and the right priest to help them with dedicating their son and making the required sacrifice. They wanted to get this “right.” Do you know what that feels like? It usually feels like fear that you’re doing it all wrong! So, yes, they probably found themselves speechless with surprise when this older gentleman – who was not a priest – came up to them and took their baby in his arms and blessed God, and then blessed them. How did this man know these things about Jesus? Was he a prophet? Or was he part of their little club of people who had received a visit from the angel Gabriel – or some other angel? . . . Because Mary and Joseph know that is quite possible, even if Simeon didn’t know that! But, no, Simeon had been led by the Holy Spirit to know these things about Jesus – much as Mary’s cousin Elizabeth had been filled by the Holy Spirit and the knowledge that Mary was pregnant with a holy child when she came to visit. And I think it was probably the Holy Spirit who guided Anna (who was known to be a prophetess) to be right there, right then, to sing her praise to God, and to talk about this child with all who were waiting for their Messiah to come to save them.

Each time that I read this passage I'm always surprised anew by the fact that Simeon and Anna were able to let Mary and Joseph and Jesus continue on their way not only with the required dedication and sacrifice, but to also leave the temple to go home! It boggles my mind that Simeon and Anna didn't beg the Holy Family to stay longer. How could this short glimpse, this brief time of holding the baby, be "enough" for them? Doesn't that seem unbelievably incredible to you, too? Who could let go of the Messiah? Anna and Simeon had been waiting their **WHOLE** lives to see the coming of the Messiah, and that day had finally arrived! And after sharing just a few minutes together with Jesus, would they really just hand this baby back to Mary and Joseph and wish them safe travels back to Nazareth? Come on! Think about how long it takes **ANY** couple with a new baby to extract themselves from a crowd of adoring adults who want to see and hold the baby. That's **ANY** baby! But think how much harder it would be for a couple to try to leave if their baby was the Son of God, the promised Messiah! They could have easily ended up barricaded in the temple, living with Anna and everyone else who was waiting for this Messiah to free Jerusalem! But instead Mary and Joseph and Jesus safely finished what they had come to the temple to do, and then they returned to Nazareth in Galilee. And once again – *WHOOSH* – time flies in the Gospel of Luke! Verse 40 reads: "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

Which goes to show that even the baby Jesus doesn't stay a baby for very long! This was part of what had to happen when God chose to become incarnate in human form as a baby. A human baby grows into a child; the child becomes stronger and more mobile; and as the child matures the child gains experience and wisdom. And when the child was Jesus, and it was apparent that the favor of God was upon him, all this favorable growing and maturing must have given Mary and Joseph a lot to think about. I do not envy the hard job Mary and Joseph had of figuring out how to be first time parents with Jesus. What would happen if God wasn't pleased with a parental decision that you made?! Or how would you know **FOR SURE** if Jesus was talking back to you, or sharing a prophetic word from God? Hmmmm. . . . I'm thinking Mary and Joseph just had to do the best they could each day, and that they kept loving Jesus no matter what. . . . Of course that's essentially what most parents conclude is the path to good parenting: do the best you can each day; and keep loving your kids. . . . Well, that and prayer. The phrase, "to pray without ceasing," does not seem far-fetched in the context of parenting. And don't you think Mary and Joseph must have prayed steadily? Perhaps the author of the Gospel of Luke just assumed that we would understand that and didn't spell it out for us here as we quickly travel through time from Jesus' infancy to age twelve. Yes, I said age twelve. That's how old Jesus already is as the story continues on in the next paragraph of the Gospel of Luke. They don't stay little for long.

Amen.