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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
January 1, 2012
Luke 2:21-40
“In God’s Time”

It's hard to believe that Christmas was just a week ago. Confetti has already fallen in Times Square and been quickly swept away. Christmas trees will be lining the curbside this week, and wrapping paper has already gone out with the recycling. And you may have noticed that Valentine's Day Cards have been on display in every grocery store since Wednesday. Holidays come and life stops for a little while. We savor the sounds, tastes, feel of the season. Then life goes on, and somehow we each slowly get back to our own respective “normal.”

The same is true for Mary and Joseph. The angels that were singing just verses earlier have retreated to the Heavens, the shepherds have gotten back to their sheep, and the wise men have gone home by another way. And so today's text opens with the Holy Family getting on with their life together. They have cleared out of the manger, regrouped, and focused on being a family together. And as a good Jewish family, they have begun their life together by setting out to bring up their newborn son according to the customs and beliefs of their faith.

And so, Luke tells us, that eight days after Jesus was born, there was a ceremony during which he was circumcised and named. Luke goes on to tell us that after another 32 days have passed, the time of purification for a mother after the birth of a male child, Mary and Joseph went to the temple once again. Here they gather to consecrate their first-born son to God as was the practice of their faith, to honor God's command to Moses: “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.” (Exodus 13:2). As one commentator states: “All firstborn animals had to be redeemed or sacrificed. Firstborn sons had to be redeemed (Exodus 13:11-15) (for) the price of five shekels of silver (Numbers 18:15-16)[1].” They also make a purifying sacrifice on Mary's behalf of two small doves according to the law in Leviticus. We read that this was the sacrifice of a poor family, a substitute offering for those who could not afford the customary sacrifice.

But just as life was about to be normal, with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus moving past the exceptional events of the past several months and simply settling down, two characters enter the scene and remind the parents that they have in their care a most exceptional child.

Enter Simeon and Anna: a dynamic duo introduced to us by Luke, who makes sure that God's word is spoken through both male and female prophets to all who will hear.

Simeon, we are told, is a man of deep faith, who has been waiting for decades for God to fulfill a promise to him: a promise that he would get to see the Messiah before he died. And today is the day of God's promise-keeping. Led by the Holy Spirit to the temple that day, he recognizes without introduction that Jesus is the one for whom he—and all people—have been waiting. And he testifies to the identity of Jesus: that he will be the one to bring light to the Jews and Gentiles; that he will evoke the fall and rise of many; that he will be a source of revelation into the hearts and minds of many. And that he will know heartache, as will the mother who bore him. Then Anna, the prophetess of advanced years, praises God and testifies that Jesus is the one who has come to ensure the redemption of Jerusalem.

In the midst of normal living, of day-to-day comings and goings, Simeon and Anna saw what others missed. As this poor young couple entered the temple that day, by a stroke of luck or of faith or of the grace of the Spirit, they saw with their own eyes that God was up to something amazing through the young child before them. They could see in the midst of the seemingly routine, and perhaps even mundane, that God was up to something extraordinary. God was, in this little baby, present in the present world, working for the redemption of God's people. As they looked upon the Christ-child, they saw that their hopes had been fulfilled: and not just their hopes, but the hopes of a nation, the hopes of a world. Something new was happening, as in Christ the possibility for a new future was unfolding: the possibility for salvation and revelation, of redemption and new life. They could see the exceptional in the guise of the normal, the amazing in the midst of the ordinary. In this little baby, they saw God.

We long to share this vision. We come here each week hoping that in the midst of the events of our daily lives we, too, will be awakened by the Spirit, and by grace see God's presence in our midst. We long to look upon the face of the Christ-child and know that our hope is not in vain, that our faith is grounded in truth. We want our normal life—the routine commitments, the mundane tasks, the moments of anxiety, of joy and despair—to be interrupted by God's real presence in our very midst.

But how? How can we see God in our grocery lists and to-do lists? How can we see God when we mop the floor, pick up the mail, or visit a neighbor? How can we recognize God in the day-to-day, when we often struggle to even see God for sure in the exceptional?

The text for today gives us a clue, reminding us that Simeon was touched by the power of the Holy Spirit. It had been revealed to him that he would encounter the Savior, and so he was ready for it. With this awareness before him, he left his heart open to the Spirit and kept his eyes open so that he would not miss this revelation. And Anna showed up too. She clung fast to the community of faith, in the midst of her worldly tribulations. She stayed anchored in her faith, in the discipline of worship, and in the power of prayer.

This is our entrée, too. For we see that God's people recognize God when they have trained themselves to recognize God, when they have readied themselves to receive God, when they have opened themselves to greet God.

So must we ready ourselves: not for the spectacular beginning or ending of time, but for an awareness of God's presence right here, right now, in our very midst. And an ideal starting point is prayer. For as Simeon and Anna look with a fresh gaze at the new revelation of God's love in their midst, we have before us an opportunity to witness God's presence in our world and our lives with fresh eyes, to experience God's love with renewed hearts, to hear God's call with new openness, if we just make ourselves available to this revelation by the power of the Spirit.

This initiative takes dedicated practice. And so as we begin a new year, full of resolutions and fresh starts, I extend an invitation not just to you but to each one of us to dedicate ourselves anew to a life of prayer and to an exploration of the practices of our faith that might nurture this shift in perspective, that coach our eyes to see God in the midst of the mundane, that train our ears to hear God's voice above others, that encourage our spirits to feel God from among the over-stimulating buzz around us.

Practices may include something new for you, or starting afresh with a practice of prayer that had anchored you to the Spirit in days gone by: daily reading of scripture—even just one verse, sitting in silence before God and listening, for at least 5 minutes each day, intentionally and attentively reciting The Lord's prayer before lunch each day. We might resolve to get involved in something new at church: a prayer group, a committee, a mission ministry, a class, to stretch our spirits in God's service and learn more about our call. We might resolve to join a covenant group or find a soul friend, that we might partner with others in prayer and accountability along our faith journey. We might resolve to truly take Sabbath, even if Sabbath simply means engaging in the impossible task of turning off our cell phones and computers for one hour each day, so that we can truly stop, with no obstructions, and rest in God's love.

On this first day of the new year, can you see the Christ-child in our midst? Can you recognize that he is here with us now, in the spirit that dwells within us, in the community of faith we have become? And what do you see when you gaze upon his face? Do you see a sweet baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, who brings with him the hope and joy that accompany all newborns? Do you see a fussy, fidgety, needy person; weak and wholly dependent on the love and care of others for survival? Do you see nothing more than a character, a seasonal symbol, whose presence is relegated to nativity scenes that light up our front lawns or are tucked under our Christmas trees, on a bed of white sheets? Do you see an historical figure, a prophet of old, whose real presence years ago is a source hope that God's story might possibly intersect the story of humankind? Do you see a poetic image, a symbol tucked into tidy verse who

artfully points to a theological hope held in the name Emmanuel: that God is with us?

Today we are invited to see the hidden reality that undergirds every normal, routine, mundane moment of our life: that in this Christ-child we are offered a new hope; that we are offered a new life.

We are invited to notice how sometimes the most amazing possibilities rest in the small, the unexpected, the unimportant, the powerless.

Can you see it?

Can you see that God has not forgotten about us? Even if the world writes us off as unemployable or unwelcome, God has not forgotten about us.

Can you see that God is with us—really, with us? That even though we cannot snatch the baby out of Mary's arms, we too can praise God for the presence of our Savior in our midst right now.

Can you see that God is at work, keeping promises for the good of all of creation? Even though there are telemarketers and televangelists who tell nothing but lies, God is true to God's word and continues to work to infuse all of creation with new life. Can you see it?

God is here. God is now. God is with us. God is for us. God is calling us. God is leading us. God is redeeming us. God is forgiving us. God is renewing us. God is loving us.

Right here, in this moment. Thanks be to God.

[1] <http://sio.midco.net/danelson9/yearb/christmas1.htm>