

Luke 2:22-40

The birth of a child is a wonderful event!

Rituals in the form of baby showers. Passing on the family name.  
Family and friends meeting this brand new creation for the first time.

Then for us Christians the planning of the child's Baptism. Maybe a special gown, once worn by the baby's descendants to pass on the traditions of the family.

Rituals and Traditions: both Ancient and Modern celebrating the birth of a child and its place in the community. Who does this child belong to?

In the Gospel of Luke today, Jesus has a different kind of Birth...his lineage is to Kings and Priests but he is attended by lowly shepherds...

A different family portrait is being presented. Not to a particular community or tribe... but to the family of God as a whole...and these forgotten family members well they got the birth announcements and were invited to Jesus' birth.

It is clear that Luke's Gospel makes some things clear theologically - Jesus was born a Jew among Jews. He came under the Law of Moses. And, although He fulfilled the law in honoring his father and his mother... his ultimate obedience and belonging was to his heavenly Parent - God.

So being a good observant Jews... Jesus' parents now present Jesus to God as was prescribed by the Torah.

According to Leviticus after a woman gives birth to a son, she is impure for forty days. At the end of that period, she is to bring an offering to the temple, which the priest offers as a sacrifice, in affect purifying her.

In addition, Exodus states that every first-born male whether human or animal, “belongs” to the Lord. While the animals would be sacrificed, the first-born sons needed to be redeemed. And this was once again done through animal sacrifice.

As an aside. Animal sacrifice was the way in which ALL the gods back then were appeased. When God asks Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac notice that he doesn’t even flinch nor does he have to be told the right rituals. In the time of Abraham human sacrifice was also a reality...but not so 500 years later during the time of Jesus.

See God never works apart from culture and the ways in which we see the world... God works through them...in order for us to be able to understand and then hopefully to evolve.

Thus the Old Testament notion of redemption included the idea that the first-born son “belongs” to God in a special way and is dedicated to serving him.

And by definition KADOSH...the word we translate as Holy...means to be “set apart”. So the first born son was then set apart to serve God.

Jesus is born in the context of the covenant (a relationship) established between God and the people of Israel.

And Luke makes clear where in Jewish society Jesus’ family existed... with the poor. According to Levitical code...the two turtledoves that Jesus’ family presented are sacrifices designated for those who are poor. It is easy to miss this significant little detail...they didn’t have money.

The issue of poverty and the gospel is much more than simply a “cause” that Jesus champions. Jesus experiences poverty himself.

From Luke’s perspective, when Jesus talks about the poor, he is also talking about himself.

Now this language of purification may sound odd to us, but it arises from a sensitivity to the holy. We also make things holy by setting a part for example one day a week to recognize and celebrate God here in our midst...we celebrate and make Holy the Eucharist as well.

And when a family comes to us and wishes to turn towards God with their little one we also have rituals in place to “make holy” this child in Baptism.

But remember... its’ not just here that we experience “the sacred”... the Holy! We can encounter the holy at any time. One way a woman encounters the holy is through the unbelievable miracle of giving birth.

It’s a holiness which sets aside the natural rhythms of life and transformation. When I was first ordained, I started my first series of teachings I still call “God talk”.

And in one of my very first meetings I went around the room and asked everyone what they expected to get out of coming here. One young woman told me that she just wanted to know God. It broke my heart the way she said it and it humbled...who am I to tell you about God.

Then it struck me...she was a new mom.

I told her that while I just talked about God... that she actually experienced God first hand. She looked at me rather puzzled... then I asked her to picture her birthing experience.

I asked her about the pain... about the struggle. Then I asked her to focus on the moment they placed her first born son on her chest. I asked her to describe it. Time stands still...all the work to get their child here forgotten...pure joy replaces the pain and struggle!

I then told her that she had indeed experienced God in that moment...in fact I told her she knew God most intimately. God as that timeless moment when she felt as one and connected to her infant...when all is right with the universe...That was... by definition Holy! Set apart!

There is also a holiness that is ascribed to certain times, places and activities (such as the Temple or here in our Church).

And I would venture to say that when you walk into some churches that they FEEL Holy... while others merely feel like a building...you can feel this with people too.

And depending upon your circumstances experiencing the HOLY brings with it HOPE! Knowing that there is something greater and deeper and connected than our limited lives here...and it's humbling!

This same hope is expressed by each of the persons named in our Gospel this morning:

Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to God confident that God will keep His promises.

Simeon is described as a righteous and devout man seeking the consolation of Israel...and here it is.

The prophet Anna fasts and prays for the redemption of Jerusalem...and here it is.

It is HOPE, evident in ancient traditions, but equally alive for us today.

The action in the scene today takes place at the Temple in Jerusalem...as the dwelling place of God on earth...it is an appropriate setting for a story revolving around the theme of hope and redemption.

Remember Luke is literally writing this gospel AFTER the Temple ceased to exist around 70AD! Yet Luke is presenting the Holy and the Hope that accompanies it to his audience...so that they too could live in Anticipation of something greater than their current circumstances.

And at that time there were many who found themselves forgotten and lost in the chaos of the world...or those who were actually enslaved by the kingdom of man...just like today.

The very firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord. In Exodus, this verse is set against God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Children born into slavery belonged to their slave master; in consecrating the children to God, they are affirming a greater affiliation as a child of God, not subject to the whims of some man or some nation. Their lives are now set apart for something greater...they are now made Holy!

So Simeon awaits the moment when God will console those who are in exile (whether that's in Babylon or the Roman Empire or any of the kingdoms of this world). Taking the child in his arms, he declares that this moment of is now at hand. That this child is Holy!

But Simeon also warns Mary and Joseph that the child who marks the presence of salvation will also be the cause of the 'falling and rising' of many.

And it won't come from war, or economic overturn, or natural disaster. Instead, it come's about through radical transparency...as Jesus comes to reveal all the illusions of this world perpetuated by man and his man-made systems of power.

The windows into the soul will be thrown wide open by this child!  
Truth will be made known and from it no secrets will be hid.

Anna's description picks up this anticipation and disruption. Her constant fasting identifies her as one who mourns for the people of God.

And seeing Jesus turns her mourning to joy! God has come to bring about the return (repentance) of God's people from exile.

At the center of this is a small child. A child – always hope for a new tomorrow! Hope for truths revealed...Hope for something greater than the petty ways of our brief lives.

Substantial words spoken about someone so very small...potential!

And Luke has been playing on this contrast throughout the birth story. The savior of the world is born in a stable, while another 'savior' of the world, and son of god Caesar, sits in Roman splendor.

In striking contrast, Jesus' parents bring the offering designated for the poor... but this child... born into the poverty of this world will be our true Savior. He will reveal and will be God's hope and our redemption!

The tension Jesus has with the Law is never that of an outsider, but as one who is a faithful Jew.

Practices of the law that subvert God's command to love are unacceptable requirements...and Jesus repeatedly condemns those who attempt to flaunt their holiness before God without loving others...especially those others that you may consider outsiders.

So where is God birthed into the world today. Where do we look? Where will we seek and find God in the world today? You don't have to look far!

At Epiphany we talked about following a light and then you becoming a light for others to follow as well...and who does Jesus choose to reveal hope...us priests and bishops or is it the any-bodies... anywhere... especially those at the margins who have not been corrupted by the ways of man and power.

The good news of Jesus' birth is that insiders and outsiders alike can carry the good news of God's hope into the world...We can show to others hope...salvation, liberation, and acceptance of God's love and mercy. Where they too can experience the Holy!

For you all have been set apart to love and serve our Lord...and how do we do this...by loving and serving one another...especially the least of these...those who need Hope...those who need Holy to show up...Those who need you!

Your faithful servant,

carmen