

# “Merry Christmas! Now What?”

Luke 2:22-40 (NRSV)

Christmas I – Sunday, January 1, 2012

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Merry Christmas! Happy New Year!

This week has been a week of celebration. Merely one week ago we celebrated the birth of our Lord and Savior. Last night we watched as the ball dropped to the end of another formative year.

Now is the time for rejoicing! A new day is upon us! Not only are we given permission by our calendars to make new plans and put the past behind us, but Christ, our Sovereign God, reigns among us! The long Advent is over, our fresh start is here! Merry Christmas!

Now what?

I don't know about you, but my world today doesn't seem much different then it seemed eight days ago. I got up today to the sound of my alarm clock, like most days. I took a shower and got dressed, like most days. I paid some bills, noticed that my bank account is dwindling pretty quickly between paying for my next semester of seminary and some of those holiday expenses. Nothing new there.

All in all, today is just like any other day, and not much has changed. The only change I really notice is that after all the cookies I sampled for Santa my clothes are feeling a tad more snug than usual, but otherwise everything is still the status quo. Despite the fact that our salvation was born in a stable just a week ago and the new year is merely hours old, I'm still single, I still have more expenses than my job can afford, I am still a lupus patient, some of last terms grades still haven't posted, the pile of laundry I have been putting off since I got back to Ohio are still sitting in a pile on the floor, and much to my parents chagrin, I still have a stack of books in their living room that I probably won't touch until I pack up my bags and head back to Chicago.

Christ may now be living among us, but my life is exactly the same. How about you?

Advent is this miraculous time where we wait and prepare for the coming of Jesus. We wait and prepare for our lives to be transformed by God's presence in our midst. We expect that as baptized members into a family of saints and sinners, as God's chosen people, that when Christ comes to live among us our worlds will flip upside down and the frustrations of this realm will melt away. But Christmas has come and gone, and nothing really has changed.

Sometimes in the hustle-and-bustle of the holidays, we forget that Advent isn't really about waiting for the time to celebrate that Jesus was born in a stable all those years ago. Advent is about celebrating that Jesus came once and that he will come again, this time restoring the earth and its people to its place of righteous glory. While it's true that last week we celebrated that Christ came into human form, prior to that we spent four weeks celebrating that Christ will come again.

The question we must ask ourselves is why when we live in the balance of God's fulfillment and a heavenly future are our lives exactly the same? We have all this knowledge that the future before us will be filled with the glory of God, yet many of us sitting here this morning are our balancing our checkbooks in our head to we figure out how much we can afford to drop in the offering plate. We have an extraordinary future before us, yet living into that future can seem stagnant and ordinary. Reality isn't nearly as exciting as the hype.

Looking at our passage today from Luke, it is a little jarring that so quickly after the birth of Jesus reality sets into this gospel. One moment visions are descending upon Mary and Joseph, shepherds are seeing lights in the night sky, but as soon as the echo of the angels voices dissipate, reality strikes back in.

Our lesson today finds us at the purification of Mary and Jesus. Following through with Levitical doctrine, Jesus would have been circumcised on the eighth day after he was born. Having given birth to a male son, Mary would have been seen as ceremoniously unclean for one week after the birth itself, and would need to wait an additional 33 days before she would be allowed to touch anything holy. That means Mary would not have been able to set foot in the sanctuary until Jesus was 40 days old, which is the day seen in today's gospel.

Before we move forward, we need to keep in mind that the writers of Luke wrote this gospel somewhere between 85 to 95 years after the death of Christ. Many theologians look at this gospel as one of the first Christian histories, as opposed to a diciplicistic account shared by someone who was present with Christ while the events occurred.

This gospel was written for a group of Jewish people who were adjusting to the knowledge that the arrival of the Messiah didn't turn out exactly how they expected it to. Nothing in prophetic doctrine had prepared them that the Messiah would come and go while their day-to-day lives remained the same. Adjusting in a post-Christ world was not easy, and in the early days the discussion on how to move forward upset their cultural dynamic and tore many communities apart.

It is important to apply this lens of history to today's reading and remember that Luke not only tell us of Jesus, but of how the roots our Christian heritage began to form. This gospel is as much about helping to support a young religion as it is about sharing the good news of Christ. The Holy Spirit working through this gospel is trying to heal some wounds that centuries later we cannot fully understand.

While this purification timeline may seem like unnecessary exposition, and even a bit sexist to our modern mindsets, this waiting period would have been incredibly important to the people of the early Christian church. These were people who still identified themselves as being Jews, people who needed to know that Jesus and his human parents followed Levitical doctrine as a part of a shared cultural heritage.

The Jewish community was looking for their Messiah, and would not have believed in the divine providence of Jesus if he and his family did not respect or adhere to their religious culture. This

timeline of their purification rights is a solidifying factor of Jesus' authority, showing that he was in fact the leader they had been waiting for. Jesus would never have been seen as a true leader of a group of people if he wasn't one of the people.

This notion of being "one of the gang" isn't all that uncommon from our society. Pastors can only start the process of becoming clergy once they are baptized members of God's family, teachers are only given license to teach once they've been to school, and the only people who are legally allowed to take on the role of the President of the United States are those natively born on American soil. We like our leaders to be one of us. It is no accident that Luke shares with us that Jesus, the king of the Jews, was raised by human parents who followed the ceremonial traditions of that culture. This step would have been an ordinary rite of passage for any Jewish man, and vital for growing the Christian faith.

We also learn from Luke that Mary and Joseph were like most Jewish people of their time – poor. Levitical doctrine required a sacrifice of either one sheep, or a sacrifice of pair of turtledoves or pigeons. The sacrifice of the birds as opposed to the sheep confirms that socially Mary and Joseph's standing was pretty low and they could only afford the least expensive sacrifice.

In many ways, Jesus' first few weeks on earth were as anti-climactic as our own experiences this past week. Like many of us, money was tight for the holy family. Like many of us, they had rules to follow and obligations to uphold. This isn't the fairy-tale lifestyle one may imagine when they think about our Triune God living among us in human form. Their lives were fairly ordinary.

But then, out of nowhere, something miraculous happens. Simeon, a man described as being righteous and devout (again here meaning followed Levitical doctrine to the T) knew that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Upon seeing Jesus in the temple, he takes the babe and says:

“<sup>29</sup>Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace; according to your word.”

This statement is Simeon's recognition to God that he has seen the Messiah, and now accepts his death. He continues:

“<sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all the peoples, <sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel.”

The word salvation in this context can also mean consolation, or redemption. That means translated another way this verse would read: “for my eyes have seen your consolation” or “for my eyes have seen your redemption.”

After blessing Jesus, Simeon then goes on to tell Mary:

“<sup>34b</sup>This child is destined for both the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be oppressed <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

This moment in the temple is a guarantee that the ordinary reality that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are experiencing on that day will not be ordinary that is to come. The look of ordinary is going to change, and Jesus will be the reason for it.

Simeon all but says directly “Hey, what you know of Jewish culture and community is going to change, and it’s not going to be pretty. It will come on the sword of oppression. It will come on the tears of pain.”

Jesus will not only speak to the oppressed, but be oppressed himself. He is a child destined to both raise Israel from its current state of sin and despair and be the reason for its cultural history to fall. These are extremely volatile words to tell a woman about her newborn son, even when he is the son of God. As Christians, we want to live in the glory filled moments where the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she will bear a child who will save the world from its sinful nature, but who among us wants to be with the woman who hears that her newborn will be a catalyst for friction within a religious community and will be a sword to her own soul?

At the time, Christ entering the world in human form didn’t seem like good news to all people. Throughout his life, Christ’s presence threatened social understandings, his example rocked the foundation people had plat-formed their lives upon. He questioned the authority of those who had always had power, and forced people to question if the way of life they’ve always lived indeed reflected the will of God.

The ordinary reality that was the status quo when Jesus lived on earth needed to a shake-up in order for change to happen. The societal rules that were the norm but prevented a connection to God needed to be broken down so they could be rebuilt in a way that was healthy and honest. Knowing the need for the shake-up and understanding the fruit of being broken down doesn’t make the experience less rough to the touch.

There is a reason why the gospel of Luke was written almost a century after Christ died and rose again, and that was because the fraction of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection still hadn’t been healed. The aftershock of his presence was intense. We now live 2,012 years after Jesus was presented in the temple, and still the community of God remains fragmented still.

It is so easy to get wrapped up in the hoopla of the holidays, but now that reality has descended, it is hard to maintain hopeful anticipation. It is easy to get wrapped up in the joy of two parents welcoming the son of God into the world, but the reality that this child will divide the world in order to unite it is a reality we’d rather not mention in our ordinary lives.

This division is complicated, it’s messy, and while we appreciate the wisdom of the process, we would like to push that recognition of division as far away from our ordinary lives as we can possibly muster. Thinking about Simeon telling these words to Mary makes us uneasy, and we’d much rather flip forward a few chapters in Luke to get to the more palatable passages where Jesus heals the sick and beseeches us to love our enemies.

But in the rush to place ourselves on more spiritually soothing ground, we miss glimmer of hope found through Simeon’s words:

“for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people.”

“for my eyes have seen your consolation, which you have prepared in the presence of all people”

“for my eyes have seen your redemption, which you have prepared in the presence of all people.”

Now is not the time for us to turn our eyes from the Advent that is before us. Sure, that season of the year may be at our backs, but our true Advent is before us. Salvation is coming. Consolation is coming. Redemption is coming.

There is nothing ordinary about this time where we wait and work to continue to fuse together a community that needed to be broken down for its own good.

It may seem like not much of our life has changed from last week to this one, but that is not true. In the past seven days, we have laughed. In the past seven days, we have seen the snow kiss the ground and transform the beauty of our world. In the past seven days, we have lifted our voices in praise and thanksgiving with other Advent people. In the past seven days, we have been forgiven of our sins, both known and unknown. And in the past seven days, we have been loved by God more than we can ever possibly imagine.

Moving forward is not easy. Sometimes we will be broken down in order to be built back up, while other times the joys of life will just flow to us with great ease.

As we greet this New Year, we will be tempted to make new resolutions, to live in the fresh start. While those are lofty goals, God is challenging us to dig a little deeper and recognize that we don't always need a clean break in order for it to be a good break. It's okay to get a little messy, to revel in the ordinary, for Christ is with us, living among us, saving, consoling, and redeeming.

Amen.