

THE COMING LORD: BACK TO LIFE AS NORMAL?
Advent B6 – Isa 61:10-62:3; Ps 148; Gal 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40
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Discarded Christmas trees litter the streets waiting for the garbage man: an unmistakable and “unmissable” sign that another Christmas has come and has gone. Pretty lights are unplugged and tossed into a box, rolls of unused wrapping paper find their way back to closet shelves, and many of us here today go back to work or school tomorrow. Another Christmas has come and has gone, another new year has begun, and now it is back to life as normal. Someone has quipped, “Anyone who thinks Christmas doesn’t last all year doesn’t have a charge account.” It just may be that Christmas is a time when many others besides Santa find themselves “in the red.”

Thanks to the Gospel of Luke, we have a story that speaks to us after shepherds, angels, and heavenly hosts are gone. Mary and Joseph have a son to rear, religious obligations to keep, and a trip back to Nazareth to make. Sounds familiar, doesn’t it? Sounds like back to life as normal. Let’s look to Luke 2.

²²When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they [Joseph and Mary] brought him [baby Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³(as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him (Luke 2:22-40, NRSV).

The story begins with Mary and Joseph bringing the infant Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for “their purification.” “Their” is ambiguous, and it seems that Luke has combined two rituals prescribed in the Old Testament: the dedication of the firstborn (Exod 13:1-2) and the purification of the mother (Lev 12:6). The firstborn, as Luke points out, was especially “holy to the Lord” and must be bought back for five shekels. As far as we know, there was no requirement that this be done at the temple, but there is also no evidence that it could not be performed there. The purification of the mother is an altogether different ceremony. For forty days after giving birth to a male child a woman was ritually unclean. At the end of that period, a sacrifice for purification of the mother was offered. For those who were poor, the sacrifice was—as Luke informs us—two young pigeons. Notice with me the symbolism involved in Luke’s recounting of these ceremonies. *First, Luke emphasizes that Jesus is genuinely and rightly “holy to the Lord.”* Luke deliberately does *not* describe the ceremony of redeeming the firstborn, so that in the story as we have it, Jesus is never “bought back” but belongs completely to the Lord. *Second, Luke reminds us that Jesus is from birth one of the “poor.”* It should not be surprising, then, to see Jesus’ identification with the poor throughout Luke’s Gospel. *Third, all of this action takes place in the temple, the very center of Israel’s spiritual life.* And in the physical center of the worship of Israel, this family meets Simeon.

Simeon's beautiful hymn is widely known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, after the first two words of the Latin Bible (the Vulgate). I must confess, this song is one of my favorite sections of Scripture; I get goose bumps every time I read it. I still recall singing this hymn during my days of college choir. In essence, Simeon says, "Now I can die in peace." The reason why Simeon may depart in peace is that he has witnessed the Lord's "salvation"—a wordplay on the Hebrew root of the name "Jesus," which means "the Lord is my salvation." Simeon is holding "salvation" in his arms. And this gift of salvation is not only the fulfillment of God's specific promise to Simeon, but also the fulfillment of God's ancient promises to the patriarchs. But sadly enough, Simeon realizes that not everyone will recognize and receive God's gift of salvation. Even in the cradle, the cross awaits Jesus. Forgive me, for I do not wish to spoil the spirit of Christmas, but the tale of Christmas is more than the announcement that God has become one of us; it is also the acknowledgement that we will kill Him.

Simeon is not the only pious Israelite in the temple. An aged prophetess, Anna, also praises Jesus. It is never just the famous preachers, the Peters and Pauls and those who follow in their footsteps, who bear witness to God's work. Far more often it is through devout women like Anna or faithful men like Simeon that the good news of redemption comes to God's people. The hope of Anna and the peace of Simeon come only to those who accept Jesus, God's gift of salvation.

Nearly fifty years after the birth of Jesus, the Apostle Paul would reflect on the meaning of Jesus' coming into the world and would write the following words of Galatians 4.

¹My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; ²but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. ³So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. ⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God (Gal 4:1-7, NRSV).

Although none of the familiar details of what we call "the Christmas story" can be found in this text, Paul does relate a story built around the plot of the divine decision to send the Son. The background for the story is not the political situation of first-century Palestine,

but the desperate situation of humanity—waiting, enslaved, and homeless.

Throughout this passage, Paul mingles three sets of images: (1) the minor who awaits the time of adulthood when he or she can possess the family inheritance; (2) the slave under the control of the elemental spirits of the universe and in need of deliverance; and (3) orphans who remain homeless until they are adopted into the family as full members. While it is not easy to follow Paul's thought, I would like to make three points that seem very clear. *First, the primary actor in this drama is God.* It is God who waits for just the right moment, who takes the initiative to send the Son, and who confirms the action by sending the Spirit. For Paul, the Christmas story is, above all else, a story about God. *Second, the plot of the drama revolves around two moves God makes—the sending of the Son and the sending of the Spirit.* The sending of the Son is for our liberation and adoption. The sending of the Spirit is to overcome our fear and timidity. We can both *know and feel* that we are children of God! *Third, there are the recipients of God's gracious activity: as Christians, we are minors who possess the inheritance, slaves who are free, and orphans who are now adopted.* We are children of God.

Back to life as normal? . . . No! . . . No way! . . . Never! Christmas is more than decorated trees, colorful lights, and neatly-wrapped presents. And the first Christmas, it was more than a star in the night sky, shepherds tending their sheep, magi traveling from afar, and even angels singing praises to God. The first Christmas, it was more than changing B.C. into A.D. and then counting forward rather than counting backward. *For me, Christmas is the end of all that is "normal."* God has become one of us! How can anything ever be the same? God invaded our world! How can that world ever be normal again? For me, Christmas is the story of God who liberates us from the slavery of our normal sinfulness, who redeems us from the bondage of our normal selfishness, and who saves us in spite of our normal stupidity. In contrast to the gods of man's making, there is nothing normal about the God who makes man.

I want to be more than normal. And that is what Christmas is all about. It is the extraordinary God becoming an ordinary human to show us how to live extraordinary lives. Once your eyes see and your mind understands and your heart feels God's "Christmas" gift, there is no going back to what is "normal."

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