

ONE LAST JOURNEY AFTER CHRISTMAS: A TRIP TO THE TEMPLE

Luke 2: 21-40

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It's the first Sunday in January and if you've taken a look at the bulletin and the title of this Sunday's sermon you're probably wondering, "Why in the world are we still on this journey to Christmas." Like the kids in the back seat of the family's SUV, you're probably grumbling, "Are we there yet? Will this trip never end?" Have no fear. This is indeed the last Sunday of our journey and it's become not so much a journey to Christmas, but a journey after Christmas. Last week it involved the flight of Mary and Joseph and the Christ Child to the security and safety of Egypt. This week it involves something that happened much earlier, about 40 days after Christ's birth. In fact, it took place before the Wise Men arrived and before the Holy Family's hurried departure to Egypt. Additionally, it didn't take place in Bethlehem, but rather in the beautiful temple at Jerusalem. It was something that all good Jewish parents did for their first born sons. So let's go on one more journey, a short one of about ten miles and discover what happened.

In many Christian homes, when a child is born, there is a Christening. Mom and Dad take their baby to church along with friends and family. The child is introduced to the congregation along with the name that has been selected for the little one. Scriptures are read and prayers are offered. Frequently there is a baptismal ceremony and the parents are admonished to rear their son or daughter in a Christian home. Something of a similar nature took place among the Jewish people centuries ago and in various ways, is still being practiced today. It involved a number of things over a period of time that lasted about 40 days, especially with regards to the birth of a first born son. The first was the naming of the child and his circumcision which took place on the eighth day of his birth. In the twenty-first verse of the second chapter of his gospel, Luke tells us, "On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise Him, He was named Jesus, the name the angel had given Him before He had been conceived." Luke then goes on to tell us about a second ceremony that took place about 32 days later. Dating all the way back to the days of slavery in Egypt, it commemorated the deliverance of the Israelites' first born sons when the angel of death visited the homes of the Egyptians. In recognition of what God had done for their ancestors, the people of Israel were instructed in the book of Leviticus to present a special offering unto the Lord near the time of the birth of their own first-born sons. For well to-do families it involved procuring an offering of a one year old lamb and a pigeon or turtle dove. For the poor the offering of two birds, either pigeons or doves, was deemed to be sufficient.

Desiring to be true to the commandments of the Lord, Mary and Joseph decided to fulfill the religious obligation and chose to do it in at the temple in Jerusalem. After all it wasn't that far away. They would go to the temple and present their son unto the Lord. Being impoverished, they brought with them the prescribed offering of two young doves or pigeons. Let's see what happened.

Waiting that day in the temple was a man by the name of Simeon. He may have been a priest. In any case, he was a godly man who was filled with God's Spirit and longing for the day when the Lord would send a deliverer, a messiah to rescue His people. On this particular day he felt a strange urging to make his way into the courtyard of the temple. There was a vast crowd of people milling about. Then he saw them, a peasant couple, the father carrying a small bird cage and the mother holding a young child in her arms. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Now, that promise had been fulfilled. His pace quickened as he walked up to the couple and introduced himself. Then with their permission he took the infant Jesus into his arms and praised the God declaring, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32). Mary and Joseph were amazed at the scene which was unfolding before them. Once again God was telling them that this child of theirs was no ordinary little baby boy. Giving the child back into the arms of his mother, Simeon had more to say. In accordance with the religious traditions of Israel, he blessed the family and then he said to Mary, perhaps leaning a little closer so that only she could hear what he had to say, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." Then speaking very poignantly and personally to Mary, he whispered in her ear, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2 34-35). I'm sure that years later, at the foot of the cross, Mary remembered those words and wept.

However, this was not the end of their journey to the temple. What had just taken place had occurred within a small gathering, just three people and a few onlookers. Now the whole temple courtyard was thrown into a commotion by an elderly prophetess named Anna. Having lost her husband after only a few years of marriage, she had literally become a resident of the temple, worshipping the Lord night and day, fasting and praying. Now 84 years of age, she started telling everyone she met about this Child and how He was the fulfillment of God's promise to redeem His people. Leaving the temple, Mary and Joseph were assured once again that their child was indeed a special gift from God.

So what does this biblical account about Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus have to say to you and me on this first Sunday of the New Year? Let

me suggest that it speaks to us in three different ways. Here's the first one. Godly parents raise godly children. Sometimes, I believe, we are tempted to believe that Jesus arrived fully aware of who He was and what He was supposed to do. That assumption, however, is not supported by the Scriptures. Just like you and me, He had to learn what it means to be a child of God and that learning began at home. It began almost from the moment of His birth when He was given the name of Jesus and when He was dedicated to the Lord at the temple. It continued as He grew up. The gospel writer Luke tells us that Jesus' parents celebrated the Passover in Jerusalem each year, a journey of about 100 miles from their home in Nazareth. In other words, they were careful to observe the traditions and beliefs of Judaism and they taught them to their Son. That's why Jesus amazed the teachers of the law when at the age of twelve, He accompanied His parents on their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the temple. I am personally convinced that His knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures was the result of what He had learned at home as well as the instruction that He received at the local synagogue. I also believe that the same is true with regards to our children and our grandchildren. It's what happens at home that makes the difference with regards to the upbringing of our children.

On Sundays we frequently sing songs written by Charles Wesley and we all know that his brother, John Wesley, was a great evangelist. Those two brothers brought about a spiritual awakening that revolutionized and revitalized the cultural, moral and religious life of England in the 18th century. But are you aware that had it not been for their mother, it is doubtful that these two men would ever have achieved the spiritual greatness which was bestowed upon them? They were two of the nineteen children which their mother, Susanna, brought into the world. She was the wife of a clergyman who served in a country parish. Well educated herself, Susanna determined to raise her children in a godly home. She began the education of her children when they were five years old. The first thing they learned was the alphabet. But it didn't stop there. As they grew older they were also taught Latin and Greek. School was in session in her home 6 hours each day. Furthermore, each week she set aside a special time for each of her children so that she could support and encourage them individually. When they finished their schooling at home, they were ready for the university and at least two of them, Charles and John attended Oxford. Finally, she started a Bible study on Sunday afternoons for her family that was so popular that it attracted a multitude of people from the village where they lived. Susanna Wesley is affectionately known as the "Mother of Methodism." What she accomplished is a reminder to all of us that religious education begins at home. In fact, as many families are rediscovering through the home schooling movement, education in every sense of the word, religious and otherwise, begins at home.

Here's the second way in which this Scriptural account speaks to us. Mary and Joseph and their new born child were blessed and inspired by two older adults, Simeon and Anna. These godly individuals only had a momentary impact upon the lives of Jesus' parents and their child. I believe, however, that their impact was momentous. Here's why. Luke concludes this passage of Scripture by declaring, "And the child, referring to Jesus, grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him" (Luke 2:40). I believe that this brief encounter reinforced what Mary and Joseph already knew. They were the parents of a special child and it was their duty and responsibility to raise Him in a godly home. I'm afraid that in our modern day society, older folks are often set aside as having nothing more to offer, even with regards to their own families. Nothing could be further from the truth. God can still use "senior saints" in the work of His kingdom. That is certainly true with regards to our church and I hope it is certainly true with regards to the lives of our children and grandchildren. Like Simeon and Anna, we too can be a source of wisdom and inspiration for the generations which will follow after us.

Finally, there is one more thing that I would like to point out. In my Bible, this passage of Scripture that we have read and studied this morning has this heading, "Jesus Presented in the Temple." Yes, for the most part this Scripture passage talks about four adults—Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna. But without the Christ Child, it is irrelevant. Without Him it has no meaning whatsoever. The same is true with regards to our lives. We may be engaged in all kinds of things, but if Christ is not at the very center of our lives, to be honest, they possess very little value. At this point in my life, I am amazed at how quickly the rich, the famous and the well-known are forgotten. The world moves on and they become nothing more than a brief footnote in an obituary. So as we begin this New Year and even as we celebrate the Lord's Supper this morning, let us focus our attention upon Christ, our relationship with Him and His guidance in how we live our lives each and every day. Let us write these words upon our hearts. They are a part of a well-known poem written by C. T. Studd, a British missionary who served in China, India and Africa. It reads, "Two little lines I heard one day, traveling along life's busy way; bringing conviction to my heart, and from my mind would not depart; only one life, 'twill soon be past, only what's done for Christ will last."