

Luke 2:21-38
Dec 27, 2009

South Plains

confinement, my body's internal clock was confused. The order of things had been disrupted.

The Order of Things

The excitement of the past week has begun to wind down. The 2009 holiday season is frozen in our memories. Now the big day is past; and a few of the toys are already broken. Some of us will soldier on to finish writing the last Christmas notes even if they don't arrive until 2010. It's time to clean up the shreds of wrapping paper and sweep away the dried needles and holly berries.

I welcomed the snowstorm at our house. At least when we finally got to our house, we enjoyed looking through the trees drooping with white and seeing our neighborhood washed of distractions. It was beautiful. Even shoveling paths gave me the satisfaction of productive, physical labor. I met people on our street I did not know because we were outside and moving very slowly. A snow day has some real advantages.

The downside of last weekend was that, without Sunday worship, I felt disoriented. My routine disappeared. It wasn't a vacation because I kept wondering when I would be able to get out of the driveway, when I could go to the church, and for a couple of hours, we wondered whether we would cook supper on the camp stove. While I welcomed the enforced

I think human beings need a certain amount of order and routine in our lives. Everything cannot be a surprise. We develop habits that enable us to deal not only with situations that we encounter over and over. Our habitual routines also help us deal with new and unexpected changes. Habits and routines anchor us in a secure foundation.

One of the messages of Luke's gospel is that Jesus grew up securely anchored in Judaism. The references to the Old Testament in the nativity story are not just proof of predictions that miraculously came true. They are evidence that Jesus' birth and childhood fit like a glove with the most profound traditions of the people of God. When Jesus later came into conflict with those traditions, he spoke and acted as an insider. His life was the supernatural blossoming of all that had gone before.

For example, it was no accident that shepherds attended his birth. The greatest king of Israel had been a shepherd; and the prophets described the Lord as the shepherd of Israel. The baby in the manger would pick up the shepherd's crook and care for his flock. How appropriate that shepherds were there at the beginning.

Luke tells us that on the eighth day Jesus was circumcised and named, the first order of business for new Jewish parents. The baby was called "Jesus" which

means Savior or salvation because that is his purpose in life. Luke wants us to know that Mary believed what the angel said that this child “will be called Son of the Most High God... his kingdom will never end (1:32, 33).” Because Mary and Joseph believed this they wanted their child to be officially incorporated into the covenant community, the community expecting the kingdom of God. He was circumcised and named according to custom.

Our sacrament of baptism parallels this ritual. Baptism in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit issues a child into the Christian community and claims the promised salvation. God doesn't require baptism. God gives us baptism as a gift that seals our entrance into God's family. Every so often I look at my Bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia. I didn't have to walk the lawn to be educated, and I certainly don't keep that piece of paper to prove what I know. But, receiving that degree, signed, sealed and delivered, is a piece of my identity that means a lot to me. Jesus grew up knowing that he belonged to the people of God. He bore the mark of that identity. He knew who he was.

The second order of business was the ceremony of purification. Two things are happening in the Jerusalem Temple. Mary is demonstrating her piety with the ceremony of purification following childbirth. No scandal follows this unusual birth. Everything is happening as it should. Just as important, she and Joseph are dedicating their first born male child to the

Lord, as ordered in Exodus 13. They purchased a couple of birds for a sacrifice to mark the occasion. It's a modest offering, probably all they could afford. Again they are following the order of things prescribed in the Law of Moses.

In important ways, many if not all of us are children of the sixties. That means we expect change. We are accustomed to the idea of revolutions in technology and science. And we've come to expect revolutions in morality and religion whether we like them or not. The danger in too many revolutions is that we will lose our footing on the path of life. We may begin to feel that because nothing seems certain, therefore anything goes. I think that's one factor in the loss of civility and morality that we see in public life these days. We've lost the habit of common courtesy.

That same danger can afflict us on a much smaller scale. Some changes overwhelm us. Even changes that we think of as positive can be disruptive. Money and travel and recognition can be wonderful, but too often those blessings have been deadly, not only for celebrities, but for ordinary people.

One way to deal with change and disorientation is to anchor our lives in the kind of rituals that were foundational for Jesus. The ceremonies and rituals developed in Christianity are different from Jesus' time, but they grew out of Judaism. They are rooted in the rich soil of Judaism.

I doubt that Jesus knew or remembered what Simeon and Anna said that day. But, it made a difference to the boy's parents. Every man who is here today is a potential Simeon in the life of someone else. Every woman can be an Anna. We are here in church to be cheerleaders for faith. Our role may be to say only an occasional atta-boy or atta-girl. It may be to provide the security and love of a regular greeting in the nursery. And, we desperately need regular, loving help with the little ones who are coming to South Plains. It may be our role is to teach or to offer a ride or to change a diaper or to clean up a spill. In every case, caring adults in the church provide order and security that translates into the ritual of love for a child's faith.

Simeon's song, known in Latin as the 'Nunc Dimittis,' begins with the words, "Now you are dismissing your servant in peace." He believed that he would see the Lord's Messiah before he died. Now, having seen Jesus, he was ready to be dismissed from this life. This raises an interesting question: Under what circumstances could I pray, "My life is complete, Lord. I can leave this world in peace,"?

Let me suggest one answer. If I can leave this world knowing that I have made difference in the life of a child, especially someone else's child in addition to my own children, then that will be a tremendous comfort to me.

For example, the sacrament of baptism has a parallel not only in circumcision, but in the reception of first century converts to Judaism. When a Gentile became a Jew, he or she was washed ceremonially as a welcome into the people of God. We receive people into the church for the first time with baptism. John the Baptist practiced a similar ritual but with a twist. He invited people to experience a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Christian baptism celebrates the reception of either children or adults into the people of God. Because we are baptized in Jesus' name, after his example, we claim him as our Savior. The title "Savior" describes his work of redeeming lives from sin, and creating a new, better life.

I love the little vignettes about Simeon and Anna. If you were fortunate enough to grow up in a church where older adults loved you and encouraged your faith in God, you already know Simeon and Anna. Even if you entered the church later and professed faith in Christ as an adult, you know people like Simeon and Anna. They are cheerleaders on our path. Long distance runners flash in an instant by the crowds that cheer them on. Every now and then, a runner will pass someone who stands out in the crowd. Maybe it's a familiar voice. Maybe the words called out are exactly what the runner needs to hear at that point in the race. That encouragement spurs them on.

The rituals of Sunday worship, baptism, the Lord's Supper, daily prayer, regular study of God's word, grace before meals – they are habits that shape and form lives. They reassure children that God loves them in a dependable way. Indeed for all the children of God, wherever we are along the journey of life, those rituals mark us and make us God's people. In the order of things, these are the habits of the kingdom of God.