

"What Is There Left To Say?"

"What Is There Left To Do?"

Luke 2:21-38 [Isaiah 42:6]

I want to begin my message with a word about our bulletin cover. Let us remember that even though our various pictures and depictions of the morning of Jesus's birth typically include the presence of the 3 Magi, they actually didn't arrive until some days later. This does not mean our depictions are wrong in a certain sense. It is just that they represent more of a sum total of the birth narratives. In any event, our bulletin cover features the camels carrying forward the Magi. The caption correctly argues that "wise men still seek him." It is the wise person who still seeks Jesus. We shall never fully understand him, nor will we ever fully comprehend how the complexity of the issues of our day stand in relation to God's providence. But nevertheless, it is the wise person who never ceases in their quest to understand, know, and follow Jesus.

This issue or question about the wise person made me think of 1 Corinthians 1:18-27 which says, in part, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." "For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength." "God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong." (NIV)

The day after Christmas Day is often felt to be a day of release. All the preparations and events leading up to and including Christmas Day are now in the past and it often feels like we need to let out a deep breath, a deep sigh of relief, as it were, as the pressures of busy schedules and events are behind us. However true this is for anyone, the question arises every year, "Now that Christmas Day is over, what is there left to say, what is there left to do?"

It is worth reminding ourselves, as inferred earlier, that the season of Advent is over and we move now into the actual season of Christmas, sometimes referred to as "the 12 days of Christmas", the days from Christmas to Epiphany, January 6th.

I chose our Gospel lesson because it tells more of the birth story of Jesus, actually. We often think of the birth story as having ended with the manger scene of which we are all so familiar. However, the part of the story of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus as found in our Gospel lesson is a very profound and necessary part of the story.

I suspect that we "Gentiles", that is, non-Jewish people and culture have something of a difficult time appreciating this part of the birth story, especially what we find in verse 21 - the circumcision of Jesus. If I understand correctly, the ritual of circumcision was a ritual of great importance. Called "brit milah", or

simply "bris", it was a celebratory ritual and event attended by family and community members. We need to remember that ritual circumcision was the ritual whereby a Jewish boy became an official member of the faith community. This ritual event and its importance is, in part, precedence for Christian infant Baptism. But the important point of all this is that we are called to reflect on our own faith journey and faith experience.

As part of the ritual, Jesus was given his name, Jesus, as foretold and instructed by the Angel. We are reminded of the 3rd letter in the book of Revelation, written to the church in Pergamum, which concludes, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it." (Revelation 2:17, NIV) We, too, who have been baptized in Jesus' name and who proclaim as Lord and Savior also have a symbolic new name. We are Christian, disciple, servant of the Lord Jesus, etc.

Without elaboration on the several verses which follow those dealing with his circumcision, suffice it to say that Jesus's parents went on to fulfill all the ritual requirements as prescribed for them by the Jewish sacrificial law.

Sometimes religious ritual is seen and done in the sense of obligation, ritual obligation. But the noun "obligation", at least in our day and age, seems to carry negative and unhelpful connotative baggage. In our culture "obligation" is seen negatively. But in the Jewish faith these so-considered "obligations" were not seen pejoratively but positively, as in faithful public expressions that are in some way similar to today's personal faith testimonies. We do not testify to our faith out of a modern day sense of obligation or duty but of joyful opportunity. Many of us know of specific individuals who have given delightful and earnest testimony of their faith in Jesus and their love for him. In our Reformed understanding, this Gospel story is more accurately read as delightful duty and opportunity to publicly express our faith.

The infant Jesus was thus consecrated to the Lord in perfect harmony with the destiny the Father had set for him. In context of the setting, Jesus's consecration meant that he was officially and publicly dedicated to the Lord according to God's perfect plan for him, and for us.

It was only after Jesus's circumcision and consecration and the required ritual sacrifice sacrificed that certain Biblical prophecies were seen to have lined up perfectly and thus perfectly fulfilled.

The story of Simeon is an especially heart-warming and poignant story. The elderly Simeon, like an unknowable number of other Jewish men and women over the centuries, had been waiting for what is known as "the consolation of Israel." The waiting for the appearance of the LORD's promised Messiah had been an agonizingly long wait. Year after year, generation after generation, the expectation and hope had been held onto. In a way only somewhat similar, it may be likened to an elderly grandmother or grandfather waiting for the arrival of a long-hoped for grandchild. In the absence of fulfillment the hope is still clung to.

There is something especially poignant in the fact that Simeon didn't just happen "to be" at the temple that specific day. Rather, he was moved by the Holy Spirit to go to the temple. I think it is rather obvious what would have been missed if Simeon had ignored the moving of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah with his own eyes.

Perhaps also a bit difficult for us modern era Christians to understand is the concept of "the consolation of Israel". By one estimation, there had been a 400 year prophetic silence, a 4 century period of time of which there was no prophecy. And yet, the people of God never gave up hope that the Messiah would eventually, and finally, come as promised. This so-called "consolation" was a comprehensive term for the fulfillment of God's "eschatological" restoration of Israel. Actually, we Christians can understand this principle to some degree. [I apologize for the strange and difficult term "eschatological". But it is necessary here. Eschatology has to do with final, end of time matters. The book of Revelation is fully about end time matters. Jesus's birth was the first step in the journey of fulfillment.

We who place our hope, not in princes or principalities or elections or personal ambitions, but place our hope in Jesus and his ultimate fulfillment have this same expectation realized in two ways. First, our hope is fulfilled in the present time for Jesus has not only come but is still here abiding with us, in Spirit and in truth. Second, our hope will also be fulfilled and justified when the end time comes, at Jesus's second coming. It will be the day the rottenness and evil of the present day will give way to life everlasting, a new heaven and a new earth, as Revelation tells us. We long for that as much as Simeon longed for what was finally revealed to him. His unwavering faith was not only justified but rewarded.

The story of Anna, the prophetess, is shorter than the story of Simeon but is just as important for its contribution to the continuing story of salvation. Her story, too, is a story that is heart-warming and serves as an encouragement and lesson to us. She has long been venerated for her deep sense of love for God, the temple, and the worship rituals that were carried out faithfully year after year, month after month, week after week, day after day. Hers was a sense of unwavering and deep devotion, not in the sense of duty as we might think of it, but out of a sense of privilege to serve and express openly her faith in God.

We are not given nearly enough details about her life, as some of us would like to have been included, but we seem to be fairly sure that she was widowed quite young in life. If typical for her time, she probably married in her mid to late teens. But then was widowed after only seven years of marriage. This was a very unfortunate thing to happen in that day, to put it mildly. It put such a woman in the category of greater risk for poverty and other societal disadvantage. And yet, she found her life's calling to serve in the temple for the rest of her natural life. As with Simeon, the Holy Spirit rested firmly upon her and lived within her. She, too, arrived on scene, perfectly timed and on cue. Moved by the Spirit she broke out into a brief exposition "about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel."

Thus, we are to never forget that no matter the way the world may be going, or not, God's Holy Spirit never ceases to live and work in those whom he has chosen to be his faithful witnesses.

Christmas Day, 2020, is indeed behind us, but we are encouraged to keep the faith, believe in God, and not in princes and principalities.

Actually, we do not have full information or description as to how these events physically took place. Did Simeon simply walk up to Mary and Joseph and silently and inexplicably, though gently and reverently, take Jesus from Mary's arms? Or did he engage them first in some small talk? "How are you this morning? So nice to see you!" Did he share a few words with them about his love for the LORD and how the Spirit had promised him that he would not die before had seen the Messiah, but that he would in fact see the Messiah with his very own eyes? If he had expressed these things, it would have put icing on the cake, so to speak, whereas this very thing that had been prophesied to both Mary and Joseph was coming to pass. This was a most profound moment in our theological history. One's mind's eye can easily see the aged eyes of Simeon look upon the LORD's Messiah which he is holding in his very own and aged hands, his misty eyes glistening in wonder as he beholds with wonder the very One Israel had longed for for so long. And then with his eyes lifted up to heaven his voice offers up in clear, strong, and unbroken resonance the incredible words God has recorded and preserved for us in Scripture. To do the text just service, the words of Simeon surely are better envisioned, read, and spoken with a sense of deep reverence and gratitude.

Anna, for her part, surely must be seen with a deep sense of reverence and gratitude as she also beholds the Messiah. Jewish worship typically took on a solicitous attitude and manner. It was typical for the priest to give a brief recounting of the good things God had done for the people of God, offering a brief history of God's people. Typically, there would have been a reminder that though the Messiah had not yet come, nevertheless, they would continue to pray for the coming of the Messiah. This prayer was not so much a reminder to God about the promise made so long ago (as if God could or would forget). It was a means by which they kept up their hope for what was yet to come.

We Americans are often said to be a very impatient lot. Patience is not one our better virtues. This is true culturally speaking. I am reminded of the fellow who prayed, "O Lord, please give me patience. And give it to me now." Thus, speaking of the individual, I will let each one of us speak for ourselves.

What is there left to say, what is there left to do? If our Biblical text has anything to say to these questions, it is perhaps this. Be encouraged to keep the faith. Do not give up hope in God's providence and timing. Do not forget that the Holy Spirit has never stopped working in the lives of God's people. Rest assured that the Spirit does not work only or merely in the lives of those who serve exclusively in the temple, as one way to say it. Try not to lose the wonder of what transpired in the coming of the Lord Jesus. From time to time, ponder each of those two events where a devoted servant of the Lord beheld the baby Lord Jesus. With clear and resonant voices they each proclaimed the fantastic thing God had done and was doing. Everything was proceeding as God had planned

it. Their patience had not been in vain and their patience and faithfulness was thus rewarded.

I don't know if anyone noticed it but the little Charlie Brown Christmas tree I placed on the table here in front of the pulpit early in Advent is missing something. What I'm getting at I alluded to in one of the early Advent sermons. I mentioned that one viewer picked up a particular element of the depiction I hadn't noticed. We will remember that Linus is famous for always carrying around his so-called security blanket, blue in color. It was at the precise moment that Linus began his recitation of the Bible verses that are at the heart of the Christmas matter, that is, what is the true meaning of Christmas, Linus drops his security blanket at the base of the Christmas tree. Thus, symbolically, we have a theological statement that Jesus is our only true security in this world. And it is not only a theological statement but a practical statement as well. We are encouraged to put into practice this truth claim and reality. If we put our ultimate trust, faith, and hope in princes and principalities, we are doomed to disappointment. We still must be advocates for Christ's kingdom and we must be vigilant in our participation in our nation's life and history yet to come. Yet, today's Scripture lesson reminds us that we cannot neglect what we are also to be vigilant about - the very things we've learned from Simeon and Anna.

Lastly, be sure to give thanks for having been given the gift of another year in God's kingdom. Yes, it's been a frightful year. We all know that. But that being said, we do have a hope and security that the world knows nothing about. According to our Gospel lesson, a sacrificial offering was made to the LORD for the infant Jesus who would himself become the ultimate, last, and only sacrificial offering that could pave the way to salvation and heaven for us. What wondrous things were in the works that first Christmas. And they weren't confined only to the actual birth event and birth day. May we, too, like Simeon and Anna approach the end of our days still full of wonder about the workings of God. May we, too, be found faithful and misty eyed at the wonder of the Infant they beheld with their very own eyes. Amen.