

Snatching Jesus

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December 31, 2017

Luke 2:22-33 — When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now 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. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided 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, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

Our Bibles don't tell us much about what happened in Jesus's childhood and young adulthood. Between the scene of the manger and the ministry of Jesus as an adult, we only get a handful of stories. This morning's second reading is one of them. And although Jesus is only an infant here, this story tells us some important things about who Jesus was, and it also teaches us an important lesson about how to be open to God's work in the world. Since we're all stepping into a new year tomorrow, I think this lesson comes at a perfect time.

First, let's make sure we understand the scene that's been set here in this story. Mary and Joseph are taking their newborn to Jerusalem, to the Jewish Temple, in order to perform two religious rituals: purification after childbirth and the presentation of their newborn to the Lord. We don't know what exactly these two rituals entailed, but apparently, they were standard for ancient Jewish families—in the same way that baptism is standard for many Christian families. Right off the bat in our second reading, then, we learn that Mary and Joseph are trying to be good, upstanding religious folk. They are following the customs that their faith tradition expects them to follow. So, well done, Mary and Joseph.

We also learn, right off the bat, that Mary and Joseph are poor. But in order to catch this, you need a bit of context. See, the story says that when Mary and Joseph went to the Temple for these religious rituals, they offered what was required by the law of the Lord: two turtledoves or two pigeons, the text says. But, according to Jewish law in the book of Leviticus, the ordinary requirement for the ritual of purification was one *lamb* and one turtledove or pigeon. That was what families were supposed to offer at the Temple after childbirth. Leviticus includes a special provision, however: those families who cannot afford a lamb are permitted to purchase two turtledoves or pigeons instead. So, Jesus's faith tradition mandated that accommodations be

made for those who were poor, which apparently included Jesus's family. This is worth keeping in mind, friends. Later on in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus inaugurates his ministry by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord has appointed me to bring good news to the poor," or when he says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God"—whenever Jesus talks about the poor, which he does often, he isn't just talking about "those people over there"; he's talking, in part, about his own folk.

But that's getting ahead of the story. Once Mary and Joseph arrive at the Temple, we are introduced to a new character. We only meet him this one time in Scripture, and we meet him at the tail end of his own life story. Simeon, a deeply spiritual man, believes that before he dies, he will see the Messiah—the person God has appointed to free the Jewish people from their oppressors. And unbeknownst to Mary and Joseph, the Spirit guides Simeon into the Temple at the very same time that this young family, with their baby Jesus, is performing these religious rituals.

Now, notice that the story doesn't say that Simeon went up to Mary and Joseph to introduce himself, inform them about his hope of seeing the Messiah before death, and then ask them if he could hold their baby. No, the story simply says that Simeon walked into the Temple, saw Jesus, and then took him into his arms. I want you to imagine what those first few seconds would have been like for Mary and Joseph. And let's modernize the scenario in our imaginations: let's say that you and your spouse are bringing your first child to be baptized here in this church. It's a special, once-in-a-lifetime moment, and you're feeling excited and a little nervous and, above all, grateful. Let's say that you and your spouse are walking down this aisle right here, with your infant child in your arms, and you happen to notice an old man, who you've never seen before, sitting on the edge of the aisle ahead of you. And right as you're about to pass that aisle, this man stands up, grabs your baby, and starts shouting, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation...." I'm surprised that Simeon got as far as he did in his little speech before Mary screamed and took Jesus back.

When we read weird things in the Bible, it's easy to forget that many of those things were weird for the people who experienced them as well. In those first few seconds, Mary and Joseph had no idea what was going on. This was not part of the plan for their family's special moment at the Temple. Little did they know, God had been planning for that moment long before their child was even born. Little did they know, God was bringing a strange old man into their lives, a man who had been hanging on the promise of that moment for years. Little did they know, God brought their young family to the Temple not just to bless them through a customary religious practice, but to bless him, this stranger—and to bless them through him, through his unexpected and, indeed, weird words, in which the Spirit of God was moving and working.

Whenever a new year rolls around, friends, many of us get focused on our own futures: as we look ahead, we make new year's resolutions about what we want to accomplish or how we want to grow. Nothing wrong with that, of course. But what if, in this new year, we focused just a bit more on noticing what God is accomplishing in the people around us and on celebrating how

God is growing *them*? What if, in this new year, we gave just a bit more attention to the aisles, the outskirts, the unexpected introductions and intrusions in our lives? What if, in this new year, as we focus on Jesus, and on our own family, and on our own future, we also keep our eyes and ears open for Simeon, for the person who isn't a part of *our* plan yet, but who is a part of *God's* plan, and through whom God will pour out blessing, if we will just look up, let go of whatever we're holding that moment, and listen. Amen.