

Faith Mennonite Church
January 1, 2012
Presentation of Jesus
Joetta Schlabach

“Welcome to the Family!”
Luke 2:22-40

Last Sunday I asked those who were present to think about the best gift they had ever received. Today I'd like you to consider your most important blessing. These might be one and the same but perhaps not. We often think of gifts as having a physical quality—something you can wrap and place under a Christmas tree—while a blessing is more often words or gestures that “infuse something with holiness, spiritual redemption, divine will, or one's hope or approval.”¹

We are here today to offer blessing: blessing to Phil and Abra as they make a commitment of membership with us; blessing to Phil and Abra and Terry and to their children Cassius and Justin as we celebrate and support them in the awesome experience of growing together as families.

This week is Epiphany, the celebration of Jesus as a light to all people. We love Matthew's story of the wise men, traveling from another country, bringing costly gifts to Jesus. But today we have read Luke's story of blessing. It, too refers to Jesus as “a light to [all people],” but the words of blessing come not from noble sages from afar but ordinary elders from within the religious community.

But before we jump to the blessing, let's review the story. According to Luke, Mary became pregnant when she was engaged but not yet married to Joseph. We know very little about them but tradition has it that Mary was likely in her mid-teens and Joseph may have been somewhat older, perhaps even a widower. When Mary is very close to her due date they need to make an 80-mile trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to take part in a census. Tomorrow I will make an 80-mile trip in just over an hour when I go up to St. Ben's Monastery to begin my sabbatical with some retreat time. But the 80-mile trip for Mary and Joseph would have been at best a four-day trip, and very likely, given the advanced stage of her pregnancy, as long as a week.

And when they arrived, they didn't have a quiet retreat room awaiting them, but rather they needed to camp out with the animals because all of their relatives' homes were already over-flowing with others who had arrived more quickly to take part in the census. Mary and Joseph likely stayed in Bethlehem for at least a month before going to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill two important religious rituals. The first was Mary's purification. Childbirth, like menstruation, made a woman ritually impure, so she could not take part in public religious rituals. Only after 30 days could she go to the temple, and then she needed to offer a sacrifice of cleansing.

A second obligation was the “redemption” of the first born. According to Jewish ritual law, the first born male, either human or animal, belonged to God. In the case of animals such as cows, goats, and sheep, the owner was expected to sacrifice the first born animal as a way of thanking God for the gift and recognizing God as the ultimate owner of everything. In the case of children, parents were expected to offer an animal sacrifice—something of value—as a way to thank God for the gift of the child. Parents with adequate means were expected to offer a lamb, but Luke records that Mary and Joseph brought the offering allowed for the poor: two turtledoves. Today our practice is to throw a shower and give gifts to the family when a first child is born. But the ancient practice was just the opposite: parents of a firstborn gave a gift to God in recognition of the awesome gift and responsibility they had received.

So back to our story: recall teen-age mom & older dad, neither from wealthy families. They have to make a major trip right when the baby is due and have that baby outside of the comfort of their own home. Then they have to stay for a month and travel again. During this time they're dependent on the hospitality of relatives. Maybe Joseph was able to do pick up a few odd jobs as a carpenter during that time. Now, at the end of a month, they can finally return home, but it's another four-to-seven-day trip,

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blessing>

and sleeping on the ground with a little baby who wakes every few hours to eat is probably as tiring as sleeping on the ground when you're nine months pregnant.

The stop in Jerusalem at the temple is mercifully at the beginning of the return journey. Jerusalem is only six miles from Bethlehem. If they leave first thing in the morning, they can arrive in Jerusalem in time to make their sacrifices and then get back on the road for the day. Mary, no doubt, notices all the couples who are arriving with lambs for their purification and redemption ceremonies. But remember, this is the woman of the magnificat. This is the woman, who sang to her cousin Elizabeth, of the great things that God was doing, through their unexpected pregnancies. So I imagine Mary, no matter how weary she might have felt, or humble her attire, walking into the temple with head held high, looking proudly at the turtledoves that Joseph carried.

No doubt it was this look of confidence that caught the attention of old Simeon. He had lived through turbulent times, with lots of political uprisings. It seemed that every week brought news of a new clandestine leader who was rising up to challenge the Roman occupation. He came to the temple every day as his own form of protest. He didn't like the fact that the religious leaders had made successive concessions and accommodations to please the occupiers, but this was the temple of the people not the leaders alone. He would continue to come here and pray for the true liberation of Israel and for a leader who might do something other than simply spill more blood.

He was tired that day. It was getting harder to sleep at night. His breathing was becoming more labored and he wasn't sure how much longer he could climb the steep temple steps. Then he saw Mary and Joseph with their baby and the turtledoves. His heart skipped a beat, but didn't cause the usual pain; instead it felt like it would burst with joy. It was as if a symphony went off in his head. Something deep within him said: "This is it! Now is the day! You don't have to wait any longer!"

Mary and Joseph hardly had time to react as old Simeon reached and took Jesus from Mary's arms. Her dismay and protective impulse quickly calmed as Simeon began to speak:

"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."

The amazement Mary and Joseph must have felt at these words, turned sobering when Simeon continued to Mary: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." The plot thickened very quickly. No gentle pinches on the cheek or comments about who baby Jesus looked (or didn't look) like. Simeon saw an entire life when he looked at this tender child.

Mary and Joseph would have plenty of time to live into Simeon's prophesy. Now was not a time to worry. Just then another elder, Anna (Hannah) entered the scene and added her words of praise and confirmation that this child would "bring the redemption of Israel."

This was by all accounts a one-time meeting. Old Simeon and Anna likely died before Jesus and his family made a return trip to Jerusalem. But that was enough. Blessings have lasting power. They're not like modern appliances, designed to become obsolete. They continue with us. The blessings and prophetic words no doubt shaped the way that Mary and Joseph raised Jesus. When they encountered difficult times and uncertainty, as all parents do, they could look back and remember the words of Simeon and Anna. And the pain that would come: that is something none of us can avoid. Whenever we say "yes" to God we open ourselves to the unknown. But that, too, is part of the blessing. According to Simeon's prophesy, when we say "yes" to Jesus we can be confident that when (not if, but when) we fall, Jesus will raise us to life. We can be confident that following Jesus will lead to a life of authenticity—our inner thoughts will be revealed.

Abra, Phil and Terry, we are inviting you to walk in this life of blessing with us. We don't have too many Simeon and Annas (and we hope the ones we have will stick around a good while longer). But we all join in offering the gifts of this community that we have received, and we look forward to partnering with you in your commitments as members and parents.