

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
December 29, 2019  
Title: So Now What  
Scripture: Galatians 4:4-7  
Luke 2:25-38

Are you still celebrating Christmas? For many of us the celebrations last for several days as we spend time with different parts of our families or friends. For others the celebrations may be over – or might never have even begun. But the question is, what do we do when Christmas is over? What do we do when we stop singing Christmas carols and put the tree and decorations away? Has it made a difference in our lives? Is there anything that we will take with us from Christmas into the rest of our lives?

So now what? What do we do when the celebrations are over? Do we simply return to normal – whatever that may be or is there something different happening?

In a way, it's the same kind of question that new parents ask, when they leave the hospital and walk into their home with their new baby. So now what? How do we feed this baby? Change him? What do we do when he cries? Who will tell us what to do? How will we know?

Do you remember times in your life when you have asked, "So now what?" What do you do after the movers have left and the boxes have been unpacked? What do you do after you retire and maybe sleep a little extra for a few days? What do you do when the Doctor says you don't need any more cancer treatments and you are free to return to your "normal" life? What do you do after the funeral when the family has gone home and you are facing the day alone?

Things that we have anticipated with great joy and things that we hoped to avoid, all bring us at some point to that question, "So now what?"

Today's Scriptures tell us about what Mary and Joseph did after the excitement of Jesus' birth, after the shepherds had left, and after they had had a few days to start to get the idea of how to take care of their new baby. During our Advent Study, we discovered that most of us did not know the story of Mary and Joseph taking the infant Jesus to the temple and the meeting with Simeon and Anna. I didn't remember ever preaching about them either, so I decided to substitute that story for the gospel that would have been assigned for today.

It is so easy for us today to think of Jesus' birth in terms of our culture and our perspective. I think it was because our Advent study was written by Amy-Jill Levine who is a Jewish professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt University that I became even more aware at a core level this year that this is a Jewish story about a Jewish couple and that it is a gift to those of us who have become included because of this story, because of Jesus' birth.

After the angels had stopped singing, after the shepherds had gone home, on the eighth day after his birth, Jesus was circumcised and given the name Jesus, the name that the angel had said he should have. Luke continues the story by telling us about Mary and Joseph presenting Jesus in the temple. Luke references a law of Moses and makes it clear to us that Mary and Joseph were intent upon following Jewish tradition and law. They come to the temple bringing two small birds, the sacrifice that was expected of people who were too poor to afford the lamb that would have been expected of people with more resources.

Mary and Joseph are honoring their faith commitments. They are exercising the responsibilities that come with being the parents of a child.

In the temple, Mary and Joseph have two significant encounters with older people of their faith.

First, they meet Simeon, an elderly man, who has been looking for the consolation of Israel. He sees the problems around him. He knows too much about war – and wants peace. He knows too much about Roman and Herodian rule and he hopes and prays for divine rule.<sup>i</sup> In Jesus, he recognizes hope and promise for the future. He announces that Now he can die in peace, because God has let him see the promise for the future.

When I served on the cabinet with Bishop Weaver, there were often times when we had to make some very difficult decisions; ones that we knew that people would second guess and that some would criticize; ones that we knew we could never really explain because there were certain things we could not share. In echoes of Simeon, he always reminded us, that if at the end of the day we could go in prayer to God with confidence that we had done the best we knew how to do with the information that was available to us, then we could lay our heads upon our pillows and know that God would grant us peace and rest.

Simeon's words have become part of the ritual of evening worship in churches that make this part of their normal practice and in times of evening devotions or prayer for others. They are called the Cantic of Simeon or "Nunc Dimittis" which is from the Latin for "Now you Dismiss". It is a proclamation that at the end of the day, we can all pray that We have been faithful and that now God will let us sleep in comfort and protection. You can find this is our hymnal at #225.

There are reasons for Simeon saying that God can now dismiss him in peace. In addition to seeing the baby he knows is the hope for Israel, he proclaims that this child will be a light of revelation to the Gentiles. Friends,

that's most of us. We are the Gentiles who are included in this story because of Jesus. Levine notes that Gentiles need the good news as well as the Jews did. She notes that "As Simeon's eyes dim, he can picture this light, growing brighter." She continues, "Because the Jewish people already have this light ... the naming of the child to them is something different. Simeon proclaims that the child is 'a glory for your people Israel'. Speaking of a small group of people, whose homeland is on the outskirts of the empire, whose land has come into Roman control, he reassures Mary and Joseph, and anyone listening, that the promises to Abraham will be fulfilled."<sup>ii</sup>

"Good news requires repeating because we can, in day-to-day activities, lose sight of it. Our hopes in the fulfillment of promises fade." Of course, it's not only good news for Mary and Joseph. Simeon is the one who warns them that there will also be conflict, that their child's life will generate opposition. Finally, Mary is told that "a sword will pierce your innermost being too."

So now what? Mary and Joseph have been blessed by Simeon. They have heard words of comfort and consolation and also words of warning of pain and conflict that is to come. God never promises us a smooth road, but God promises to be with us in whatever happens.

As if their meeting with Simeon were not enough, Mary and Joseph then meet Anna who qualifies as a prophet. Anna is always in the temple. She was married for 7 years but has lived as a widow since then. Now she is 84 years old. You could count on finding Anna in the temple almost all the time.

Luke tells us that Anna is from the tribe of Asher which is one of the lost tribes of Israel. The lost tribes were separated from the other tribes of

Israel when the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom some seven hundred years earlier. Levine tells us that one of the “major Jewish Messianic images is that all 12 tribes will be reunited. That is in part why Jesus calls 12 apostles – symbolically reconstituting the 12 tribes. With Anna, Luke tells us that these tribes are still alive to history.”<sup>iii</sup>

Luke doesn't tell us what Anna said when she saw Jesus, but he tells us that she began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. In some ways, Anna is like the female counterpart to the shepherds. They came and saw Jesus and went out and told everyone what they had seen and heard. Anna also went out and told everyone what she had experienced.

Luke doesn't tell us anything else about Simeon and Anna. They are important signposts if you will in the story. They enter at an important time and point the way toward the future.

We often have people who come into our lives for a time such as this; people who show up and may affect our lives in profound ways even though we may never see them again.

Mary and Joseph were in the temple because it was part of their religious practice; it was a ritual that was important to who they were as devout Jewish people and new parents. In the Christian church, the ritual that comes closest to this would be baptism, although we do not have a specified time when this takes place. One of the important values or side-effects of these rituals is to remind parents that they are not alone in the act of parenting. Rituals encourage them that there are those in the community who are resources for them. Mary and Joseph would not be alone in raising Jesus. They would have the help and support of their families and their community including people they did not even know.

Rituals are a reminder that there are more people than we know who have an investment and interest in those we love. When we baptize a child, we proclaim that we will surround that child and all of our children with a community of love and that we will help raise the children in our faith. That's why we have people who volunteer to teach Sunday School. That's why we have people who volunteer to be with our littlest ones during worship so that their first experiences with the church will be ones that are positive and help make them feel like they are part of the community.

That is why in this congregation and many others, children are invited to participate in communion. They are part of the family and they should not be excluded from something as important as the table of our Lord.

Mary and Joseph would continue the tradition of raising Jesus in their faith. There is only one story in our scripture of Jesus as a child, and it follows this one. This passage ends by telling us that "The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom and God's favor was on him."

Luke continues his narrative by telling us that each year, his parents went to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. This was another example of being part of a community that expanded beyond their nuclear family. Many people traveled together. When Jesus was 12, they went to Jerusalem, according to their custom. When the festival was over, they headed home along with their family and friends. There were so many of them, that it took a full day before they realized that Jesus was not with them. Luke tells us that they returned to the temple and after three days found him in the temple sitting among the teachers, "listening to them and putting questions to them. Everyone who heard him was amazed by his understanding and his answers."

It wasn't the first time and it wouldn't be the last that Jesus' presence and actions would produce results that were unexpected.

So now what? Do what Mary did. Hold fast to the faith that has sustained you and held you during the times of uncertainty. Reach out to the community of others who care and are willing to be companions on the journey.

Howard Thurman, was an author, philosopher, theologian, educator and civil rights leader during the 20<sup>th</sup> century of our country. He was also an early leader and mentor in the nonviolence movement that shaped and included Martin Luther King, Jr. He answered the question "So now what?" better than anyone I have known. He reminds that the work of Christmas is not about giving, receiving, and returning gifts. It is not about decorating or singing carols. It is not about family celebrations or special worship services. All of these are important parts of our celebrations but when Christmas is over, what happens next?

Thurman answers that with a challenge to all of us to carry with us into the future. He wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks  
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost  
To heal the broken  
To feed the hungry  
To release the prisoner  
To rebuild the nations

To bring peace among the people  
To make music in the heart.<sup>iv</sup>

May this be the challenge and invitation to us when we begin to pack away the decorations and put the presents away. May this be the invitation to do the real work of Christmas throughout the year.

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<sup>i</sup> Levine, Amy-Jill. Light of the World, p.101

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, p.102-3

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p.106-7

<sup>iv</sup> Thurman, Howard. The Mood of Christmas, p. 23. Published and copyrighted by Friends United Press 1985.