“A Fringe Blessing”

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 Psalm 148 Galatians 4:4-7 Luke 2:22-40

First Sunday of Christmas, Year B, December 27, 2020

First Presbyterian Church, Sandpoint, Idaho

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The scriptures we read this morning are amazing and filled with so much that can instruct or inspire. One of the thoughts from Luke’s gospel involves fulfillment. We hear, “According to the law… according to the law…” as this scene in the Temple takes place. Mary and Joseph are there making the sacrifice involving birds, which is the way people who are poor can afford to participate in the officially structured system of redemption. They did everything required… After dealing with childbirth, which is messy and involves contact with blood, they are now cleansed and purified. This law was from Moses and it was fulfilled. They also have Jesus circumcised, and as the firstborn son, he was dedicated to the Lord as an echo to the Exodus from Egypt claiming devout deliverance. This entire passage shows Jesus fulfilling the law. But the story does not stop there, in fact all this simply sets the stage for something new and wonderful.

Now that the birth of Jesus involves the fulfillment of the Law, creative work, transformational work beyond the administrative, is introduced through a fringe blessing.

I call it a fringe blessing because Simeon is not a priest, not even called a prophet. He’s just a guy. He’s “a man in Jerusalem…righteous and devout, looking forward…” He’s patiently anticipating and trusting that God will console Israel. “Looking forward to the consolation of Israel” implies that Israel has not found consolation, even through faithfully fulfilling the requirements of the law; “according to the law,” they did this, “according to the law,” they did that. But now he sees the consolation.

What was different about Simeon? What brought him to devout righteousness? What is it about his life that shows everything working as life is intended? (That’s what righteousness means). “The Holy Spirit rested on him.” We tend to think the Spirit has to wait until Jesus is baptized by John, with a dove descending; or for Jesus to be lead by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he faces and overcomes temptation. Pentecost certainly hasn’t come yet, with the Spirit descending as tongues of fire with the sound of a rushing wind in a post-resurrection world. Yet here is Simeon and the Holy Spirit of God rests on him, revealing to him a promise “that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” It’s the Spirit guiding Simeon to the Temple that day, some 35 acres of buildings and open courts, leading him directly to Jesus. God’s Spirit, through Simeon, is working on the fringe to bring blessing.

We also see Anna, the prophetess, deeply devoted to God and focused continually on prayer. Her vision, from the inside, allows her to see Jesus the child as the fulfillment for “all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” Both Simeon and Anna see in Jesus, fulfillment.

(inspired by footnotes in the New Revised Standard Version Study Bible).

Another aspect of this text involves both/and. There are themes happening in a both/and dynamic. The law is fulfilled, both by Mary and Joseph doing what they do, and by Jesus who is the fulfillment of the law. With Simeon from the Spirit working on the outside and Anna doing God’s work on the inside, Luke is certain to include both the Jews and the Gentiles as benefiting from the blessing of Jesus.

Fast-forward a couple thousand years… I was in line at the post office on Christmas Eve and one of the women ahead of me finished her mailing and went toward the door. Seeing someone she recognized in the line, they struck up a brief conversation. She informed him that 2020 was a rough year. She had chemotherapy and her short hair was more than a fashion choice. She’d had six surgeries this year. Yet she was smiling, and her positive attitude was evident. She was looking forward to 2021, even though she was not in the clear from the cancer and uncertainty is a daily experience.

I’ve heard other stories from people facing cancer, going into the hospital not knowing if you were going to come out, some spending weeks, if not months, in a room with no windows. This presents a both/and Christmas, learning to be fully alive in whatever life presents. Life is both a struggle, and filled with wonder. Our lives are both fleeting, and, in Christ, held in eternal Love. A both/and Christmas means Jesus is born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, and Jesus born in us. As we come alongside Simeon and Anna and the scene in the Temple that day, we’re reminded that each moment is on the fringe, the cusp of holiness.

I’d like to share something I wrote on Christmas Eve. I’d finished leading the Christmas Eve service for Facebook Live with the help of Dana and Annie, posted it on the computer in my office, then Shawna and I packed up and headed home where I fed the goat and the miniature horse and then went inside to get some supper. Then I realized the chicken door wasn’t closing properly on the chicken coop outside, so I put my coat back on, slipped on my farm boots and headed out into the cold to pull on the rope so their door would close. Here’s what I wrote regarding that chore on Christmas Eve, called Fabric of Forever.

“To keep watch over my flock by night, I walk across the domesticated driveway, triggering the motion light’s temporary flood. Clicking open the latch on the garden gate, deeper darkness of a narrower way welcomes steps into a wildness that seems older and more lasting, arousing ancient alertness hardwired into senses. Walking up the path, I glance to the compost bins, ready to jump if raiders rise, and feeling relief in noticing nothing. Easing mind and body into the quiet of calm, I move on to the chicken zone, closing their frozen door to keep them sleeping, cozy in their roosting coop. My task complete, I begin to return to the house, but on the way, I head deeper into a winter night made colder by the clear sky spread with stars.

I slow my steps on the gravel path dusted with snow, now covered with three days and nights of my visiting friend, hoarfrost; air’s moisture forming rugged crystals, jagged and fragile, emerging for their time in the shaded part of the yard that won’t see the sun until spring. A flash on the ground catches me on the peripheral. Like Moses, I turn.

Scattered shards of moon shine back Christmas Eve’s glittering lightshow. In this winter evening’s drama the curtain falls and the veil is lifted. My retina, like popcorn with each explosion, reflects the reflections of reflection. Rays of solar streaming permeate us all to soul’s core. The moon’s rule by night is not deterred by half sizes, for shadow and shine unite. Brightness lusciously illuminates pristine pastures layered in flickering flakes of light, uniquely twinkling their fractal joy as eons merge in cosmic glory.

I stop my steps so I may dance, distance dissolving to joyfully join nebulas, galaxies, planets, and angel hosts in icy rays of blue-tinged darkness sharing deep time brilliantly displayed in a suspended moment etched into the fabric of forever.” -----

As we continue to celebrate a both/and Christmas in whatever ways help Love’s fulfillment in the moment, may the blessings of Christ be with you, both now, and forever. Amen.