

“Full Circle”: Beyond Advent
First Sunday After Christmas, 2017
12.31.17
Text: Luke 2:21-40



Reflection questions... [please consider the teaching notes, first, as a basis of your reflections]

“Are you prone to making resolutions during this season? Any carry-overs from last year? Do any of your resolutions involve things like becoming more compassionate, or determining to direct even more of your discretionary income toward the needs of others, or being less resentful and finding more space for forgiveness, or more routinely practice obedience to Jesus?”

“Did you have any Simeons in your life? Any Annas? How did their faithfulness inspire your own?”

“What are some of the spiritual practices (rhythms) you have in place in your life? How have they allowed you to be more present with and present for God? Which come more easily? Which are more difficult?”

“What promise are you holding onto? Are there promises that God has already allowed you to hold? What are the indicators that you are still holding onto hope?”

“What rhythms have you established which make you consistently present to and present for God? Do they seem old and tired or ancient and proven? How might you discover new life in your faith practices?”

“Today, I am more/less _____ than I was a year ago. What will your life look like if you remain on that same trajectory?”

Teaching Notes...

Advent brings us full circle. It must, if our faith is to survive.

We experience an initial surge of energy associated with talk of “new life”, which allows us to better entertain the God-possibilities (night visions, talking angels, geriatrics and virgins having babies). It seems the deeper our pain and frustration over our present experience, the larger our vision of restoration... the more open we are to mystery. The more we are open to God.

Since this is all unexplored territory, we commit ourselves to accommodating some linear approach which we assume will better allow us to manage this salvation. Eventually, our life runs ‘head-on’ into a circumstance for which our **faith-metric** has no resolution, and you either abort the pursuit, all together, or you become seriously cynical.

If, though, we are able to navigate through such seasons without abandoning God, honest faith--- humble faith--- results in a simplicity which isn't "naïve", but realizes that there is still so much we do not (cannot) know, and we surrender, in love, to the goodness of God and a healthy dose of mystery.

One thing becomes apparent in this brief excerpt from the story: Jesus was birthed into and formed in an orthodox, Jewish culture. They kept the Jewish laws. They observed the Jewish festivals. You can read the parallel text in Leviticus 12.

On the eighth day, the male child was circumcised and officially named. His name, "Jesus", (Heb., *Yeshua*) means, "*The Lord is salvation.*" Circumcision was, for every male, a sign of their identification with the Hebrew story.

Circumcision was an initiation rite, of sorts. It was, for men, a way of saying, "*I'm in. This is my God. You are my people. I am committed to living into this Story.*"

In this episode, we run into **Simeon and Anna**. The ones I like to refer to as nativity's "**Odd Couple**". They were "early adopters" (*Roger's Bell Curve*). They were able to process revelation quicker than most. God has this way of inviting us into his Kingdom work while it is still in its development stages.

Simeon: if you grew up in church in the mid-west, you know this guy. He is the disheveled looking old dude wearing the polyester-plaid leisure suit who's always walking around mumbling 'God-stuff' that didn't seem to overlap with reality.

Anna is the "*Temple Lady*"; the old woman with the house-full of cats who "*never re-married*". She was only married (7) years when her husband died, widowed to the age of (84). She was a permanent fixture at the Temple, the one who was always welcoming everyone, holding all of the new babies, providing comfort, giving guidance. Everyone knew her as "mom". She's annoyingly optimistic.

Both Simeon and Anna had waited so long because their longings ran so deep.

• Notice the words used to describe Simeon:

Righteous (conduct)--- **devout** (Torah-observant)--- **joyful** (hopefully expectant)--- **Spirit led**.
Righteous and joyful? (judgmental and cold) Devout and spirit led? (rigid and ritualistic)

Bona fide (authentic faith) nurtures within us a sense of both stability and expectancy.

I think good faith is cumulative. It is not the result of some dramatic, and extraordinary event, but is the outcome of a series of seemingly small, insignificant expressions of trust which are signaling our willingness to cooperate; which are creating for us a "faith".

Notice that the Story moves us from faithful adherence to the Law (Temple and Torah), to a personal experience of the incarnation. Seeing Jesus, holding Jesus for ourselves. Revelation, then, becomes not something that you decipher, but someone you welcome and receive.

"What if we have been waiting for the sensational moment--- the ecstatic experience--- when the extraordinary is best cultivated in faithfulness?"

'Sacred' (holy) is what happens when we realize that the ordinary moment is filled with God.

Sacred rhythms establish the holiness of the ordinary and create the atmosphere for us to experience the extra-ordinary.

"Have you ever noticed that, most often, 'holy' stuff looks pretty ordinary?"

If you grew up observing the seasons of the Christian Church year, they are organized around the two major festivals, **Christmas** and **Easter**... "sacred" time. The rest of the year is known as **"Ordinary Time"** ["counted time"]. It's not just marking time until the next big God-event, but it's making our time count! I need to know how to do "ordinary" because it's where I will spend most of my time.

The beauty of the ordinary is that you won't even have to carve out more God-time in your schedule... you're already there!

Make God part of your routine, but welcome the disruptions.

It is true that God often seemingly **"breaks in"**, but it's also true that God simply wants to be **"welcomed in"**.

Establishing sacred rhythms helps to normalize faith. Spiritual practices simply help close the gap between the person that we think we are and the person that we want to become.

They are those very earthly decisions and activities that remain within our control/power which help to nurture our Spirit. They get God on our calendar. They allow us to keep regular appointments with him. They allow us to remain conscious of and responsive to God.

Finding a sense sacred rhythm in our lives requires a unique blend of routine and spontaneity.

Routine [def. 'custom; establish procedure'] allows us to consistently make room for God in what seems to be an already 'over-crowded' life. It allows us to determine who we are becoming.

Spontaneity prevents our lives from becoming rigid and predictable. It allows us to encounter God without having to prescribe the particulars of when and how.

"One day, Moses was tending the flock in the wilderness..." Exodus 3 [burning bush]

"Samuel served the Lord by assisting Eli... suddenly, the Lord called out to Samuel..." 1

Samuel 3

"... there is still the youngest one, but he's out in the fields watching sheep" ["This is the one. Anoint him." 1 Samuel 16]

"Gideon was threshing wheat at the bottom of a winepress..." ["Mighty hero, the Lord is with you!"] Judges 6

"That night, there were shepherds staying in the fields, guarding their flocks..." ["... and the radiance of the Lord's glory showed around them..."] Luke 2

"Anna never left the temple... she came along just as Simeon was talking with Joseph and Mary..."

Honestly, the only people that I have discovered to have truly realized transformation in some sustainable fashion, are the ones who are encountering God, “routinely”. They have put into place, rhythms, practices, and disciplines which provide substance for their vision. Paul calls it “*training ourselves to be godly...*” 1 Timothy 4:7