

After Christmas – Now What?

Luke 2:21-39

Well, Christmas is over. How are you doing? Are you glad you don't have to spend any more money for awhile, except to pay all those bills you racked up? Are you disappointed that you couldn't buy as much or do as much for your family as you had wished?

Or maybe you're glad it's over because you are tired of being expected to have a good time, and the good times never came. Maybe this was a hard Christmas for you because your family circle is incomplete without some of your loved ones.

Or do you wish it could have gone on forever? Maybe you had such a good time with all your kids and grandkids around that, now that they have all gone home or back to school, you miss the noise and the confusion.

So, how are you doing this week? Let's look in on Joseph and Mary, Anna and Simeon, after the first Christmas was over. I think we'll find that they weren't really so different from us, after all.

What about Joseph and Mary? Well, compared to them, those of us who imagine that we have financial problems might want to think again. They were just starting their family but found themselves in a strange place, without any relatives anywhere around. And they were poor – the offering that they brought to the Temple is the one the book of Leviticus prescribes for those who couldn't afford anything better. And yet they brought what they could. They tried to do the right thing.

Or, look at Anna, especially those of us who are lonely, missing people this Christmas. This lady had been married for only seven years when she was widowed. She never remarried, and at age 84, she spent all her time in the temple, fasting and praying. She didn't seem to have anyone – and yet when she saw this young couple with their baby she was not envious or despairing. Instead, she gave thanks to God.

Look at Simeon, especially those of us who are frustrated or disappointed. Here is a man who is called righteous and devout. He was looking for the consolation of Israel, the coming of the Messiah Who would right all wrongs and Who would bring His people into glorious victory. God had promised Simeon that he would see the Messiah. But all he saw was a baby – no victory procession, no instant end to everyone's problems – just a baby. And yet he blessed God.

Joseph and Mary had nothing, and yet they were obedient. Anna had no one, and yet she was thankful. Simeon could see no change in his people's outward situation and yet He rejoiced in God's salvation. What's going on here? What was it that made such a difference in all of their lives?

The obvious answer is Jesus. No, His mere presence did not change the outward circumstances of anyone in this story. But even as a little baby, somehow He transformed their perspective. When each one of them had an encounter with Christ, the result was obedience, thanksgiving, and devotion. Why is this?

The simple answer is faith. Each one of these people was walking by faith and not by sight. After all, what they could see with their eyes had not changed. Instead, their perspective changed because of their trust in God.

What could Joseph and Mary see? How little money they had in their pockets to meet the needs of their growing family. But they remembered the promises of God. They remembered what God had said to each one of them, that their child would be the Messiah Who would reign on the throne of David, restoring the kingdom of God on earth. And so in obedience to the angel and in remembrance of God's promise, they named their baby Jesus, which means "savior." That's how confident they were that He would in fact be the savior of His people, no matter how lowly the circumstances of His birth may have been. They trusted in the promises of God and so they did what God told them to do.

What about Anna? All she could see was her loneliness. And yet she knew well those words of the prophet Isaiah that we read responsively this morning: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned." So when she saw the baby, the

Holy Spirit convinced her that He was the proof that God would keep His word, that somehow, someday the Baby would redeem Jerusalem.

No, Anna did not see any outward change in her own circumstances. She did not see the Roman soldiers leaving Jerusalem. She did not see the Messiah on his throne. She didn't have to. She saw the baby, and trusted in the promises of God, and gave thanks.

What about Simeon? He had spent years and years waiting for the coming of the Messiah, for the consolation of Israel. On the day that Joseph and Mary came into the temple, Israel still languished in the grip of Roman rule. The Gentiles were still ruling over God's people, and the Gentiles were still walking in the darkness of idolatry.

But Simeon saw the baby and knew that this would be the one God would use to bring consolation to Israel. He saw the baby, and thus he knew that God would keep His promises.

He knew that God's chosen one would complete God's covenant with His people. He knew that the Messiah would be a light even to the Gentiles, opening blind eyes, and freeing prisoners from their chains.

No, Simeon didn't have to see the freedom of His people to know it was coming. He didn't have to see the conversion of the Gentiles to know it would happen. He saw the baby and trusted God's promises. And so he was fulfilled, ready to die, satisfied with his life's work.

So what can we learn from all this? Well, if Joseph and Mary and Simeon and Anna were moved to faith in God at the sight of Jesus, if their perspectives were completely altered when they got a glimpse of the baby in Mary and Joseph's arms, surely our trust in God should be even greater. For each of them saw a baby and trusted that one day He would be a king. But we know that the baby did in fact grow up to reign in humility and lowliness. We know that He did indeed reach out to raise up the lowly and that He would in fact cause the fall of many proud people in Israel.

Yes, Joseph and Mary, Anna and Simeon probably expected Jesus to bring salvation with His arm, to lead by force in the way that earthly kings do. But we know that Jesus brought salvation to His people by shedding His own blood on the cross, the blood of the covenant, so that all who trust in Him might be saved from our sins. And we know He achieved victory over all the powers of sin and death as He rose from the grave, bringing new life to all those who trust in Him – not just the promise of eternal life with Him in Heaven, but new life, abundant life in this world today.

No, faith in Christ doesn't mean that all our circumstances will suddenly change – it certainly didn't for Joseph or Mary, Simeon or Anna. In the same way, just taking a bite of bread and a sip of juice at this table won't solve our physical hunger. Yes, no matter what we say or do here, all our problems may still be waiting for us when we walk out of those doors. Yes, God may remove our weariness, but we must still run the race. Yes, God may give us strength, but the battle still goes on.

But in spite of our desperation and despair, and even because of them, Christ has come. God has thrust Himself squarely into the path of world history, and of our history. God has kept His promises. God has thus proven that we can trust Him, no matter what struggles we may continue to face.

And if we trust Him, He can change our lives. No matter what our circumstances may continue to be, God can give each one of us a new perspective and a new heart: a thankful heart, a devoted heart, an obedient heart, a heart that believes in His promises. Christ has come. Let us come to the table, trusting Him to give us new life.