

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 2:22-40

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ‘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.’

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother 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.’

There was also a prophet, Ann the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

SERMON

“Living on the Edge”

Pastor Mary Jo Laabs

Please pray with me: Eternal God, we give you thanks for the blessings of this past year. Some have not come easy, as you have ushered us through the heartaches and the illnesses, to hopeful places that came arrived quite unexpectedly. Thank you for reminding us over and over that life is not measured by the number of breaths we take...but, by those moments that take our breath away! Amen.

I like Mondays! I also... like to turn the page of a calendar to the new month. BOTH OF THESE THINGS WILL HAPPEN TOMORROW. I am anxious to open to the first page of a 2024 Calendar that was given to me by the Danz family. It highlights Bruce’s photography....what a treasure! Thank you again.

Whatever new calendars we have chosen, I believe that there is a certain expectation, a certain hope and a vision of the possibilities that lie ahead in the turning of the pages. We are on the edge of that *turning* today.

How will you envision filling the days of 2024? Will there be days of rest? A better exercise regimen... What new slate of classes await you in this semester? Is graduation on your calendar? Is there a start-date of a new job or a due-date for the arrival of a child or grandchild? What projects are on your to-do list? How will you join in the life and ministries of the church? As we sketch out our plans for 2024, only God knows how they will unfold.

One of my favorite books was written by Parker Palmer. “The Brink of Everything.” Maybe that is exactly where we are today on Ne Years’ Eve!

Mary and Joseph were there, too. They were first-time parents. The life of their precious newborn son was in their keeping. They knew that the law required them to take Jesus to the Temple forty days after his birth, an event described in today's Gospel reading. The ritual was to complete Mary's purification following childbirth, and to perform the redemption of the firstborn son as written in Leviticus 12.

Joseph, and Mary, ...after a time of sleepless nights following the birth of Jesus, and at least 30 hours of traveling the 90 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem, arrive in Jerusalem and meet to elders who also know something about time. Simeon and Anna have been waiting a lifetime to see the coming of the Messiah. I wonder if Joseph and Mary, when handing Jesus to Simeon, expected what comes naturally to us, when we get that first look at a baby. (*mime holding a baby*) "Oh, what a beautiful child...just look at those bright eyes!" Instead...Simeon took the child in his arms and *knew immediately* that God's promise had been fulfilled.

Simeon, whose day began in the Temple as any other day, became for him THE DAY he had been waiting for. He told these young parents that their little baby fulfilled the prophecy...would grow to spark a revolution. Simeon's words praised God, as he blessed them.

In the Contemporary English Version of the Bible;

²⁸ Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God, ²⁹ "Lord, I am your servant, and now I can die in peace, because you have kept your promise to me. ³⁰ With my own eyes I have seen what you have done to save your people, ³¹ and foreign nations will also see this.

³² Your mighty power is a light for all nations, and it will bring honor to your people Israel."

And then, Anna came to them...I would think that she, too may have held Jesus as she praised God and spoke to Joseph and Mary about the child whom all the world had been waiting for...scripture says that...(CEV) ³⁸ ... She spoke about the child Jesus to everyone who hoped for Jerusalem to be set free. *Wouldn't we want to tell everyone, too?*

This was not what Joseph and Mary had envisioned to happen that day. In the blink of an eye, this day had become the beginning of times that would change the world.

Has anyone prophesied to you about your newborn baby? Think of how that might feel if a great-grandparent told you, "This small child will one day do great things!"

From that day forward, the early years in the life of Jesus are missing from the scriptures, except for these few verses:

(CEV) ³⁹ After Joseph and Mary had done everything that the Law of the Lord commands, they returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. ⁴⁰ The child Jesus grew. He became strong and wise, and God blessed him.

There is only one other story of the child Jesus, when, on another trip to Jerusalem with his parents, they thought he was lost...when he stayed behind in the temple to be "about his father's business."

We have come from the story of the birth of Jesus, 6 days ago, to this...

What does this have to do with us, on the last day of 2023?

I believe the scripture is a perfect fit for today...as we look ahead to 2024. It is a story about the highs and lows in life arriving at the same time. It is the story of hope, not despair; peace when it feels like the world around us is collapsing; love in unexpected places; and a joy that take our breath away...that comes from faithfulness and trust in God.

In yesterday's Still-Speaking devotional, Rachel Hackenberg wrote: *When faith might long to claim certainty, it does its best work when it claims surrender. When it gives in to hope. When it opts for unearned trust. When it lives in dreams and apparitions beyond what can be proven. When it tells stories.*

As we grow in "wisdom and age," we can probably all agree that the best laid plans have a way of being changed. We have the stories to tell! When was the last time you planned a vacation: made reservations at a

hotel; set out to visit certain points of interest; listed the relatives and friends you intended to visit; picked favorite restaurants for your meals? When was the last time you signed up for a webinar; bought a lottery ticket; picked a day to go hunting; made a play-date for your children; planned to have coffee with friends? We made plans for a first-Call Sunday. We made plans for Christmas this year. How did plans change?

I totally agree with John Lennon when he said:

“Life is what happens while you are making other plans.”

Even though, changes in travel plans annoyed us; the inability to visit with the family was disappointing; the lottery was won by someone else; the hotel was closed due to storm damage; the coffee shop was so busy that you and your friends just stood in the long line chatting and then, decided to leave. Even though the first prospective pastor declined the call. I wonder if God laughed...and said , “Watch this.”

You might be wondering, “How could a year get any worse when my life has gone from comfortable regularity, to chaos?” When some have experienced flood and fire, hurricane and inconceivable violence. When someone has drowned while ice-fishing. When Russia has launched its biggest air attack on Ukraine since the beginning of the invasion. When families have lost loved ones who have struggled with incurable diseases. When nature has rumbled with storms of wind, rain and fire. When grief, worry, fear, hopelessness have been looming around us. *Oh, if only it would be different after the ball drops in New York City tonight.*

The words of the prophet, Jeremiah ring true: **29: (NRSV)¹¹** For surely I know the plans **I have for you**, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

If you happen to be awake at midnight, look back upon good things only... scan the year 2023 and give thanks to God. Then, take a deep breath...let it out, releasing the not-so-good-things that block your view...into God’s keeping. Look ahead with wonder... at the pages of a new calendar.

Let this be the year that we will remember as one in which **WE will have been part of the change** that we have been waiting for!

Are you making a new years’ resolution?? Is there anything on your bucket list that simply cannot wait another year? The real blessing of the future is yet to be ours. Not one of us can predict or plan it. Friends, God is out there in 2024 waiting for us to arrive.

Whatever your next plan is, stop and envision the four candles burning brightly on the Advent wreath... Let **hope** take part in the coming new year. Plan to be the peacemaker. Give thanks for God’s blessing of love. Plan to encourage one another. Plan to laugh...and to do your best to spread some joy. Keep your eyes on Jesus as he IS the light burning brightly and is the WAY to center our living for the next 365 days.

These are the best plans we can make while living this day on the edge of the new year.

Pray with me: Holy God of all beginnings and of all our endings we pray, speak in this place, in the calming of our minds and in the longing of our hearts. The new year, like a precious book of fine new pages...waits for us to create the story of 2024. *This year’s pages* are already bound between the covers of our memories. Help us to gracefully put the old year on the shelf, without dwelling either on its successes or its setbacks.

Whisper in our ears... words of love and joy as this new year approaches. Nudge us to do good and to be peaceful sharers of all that you have created. Help us to welcome in this new year as your voice rings in our ears. We are listening.... Amen.

Benediction: Now as we go on our way, know that God is with us; going ahead of us to show us the way; Going behind us to encourage us; walking beside us to befriend us; Hovering near to watch over us; and within us to grant us peace. Amen.

This hour of worship has ended, let our service continue.
Happy New Year!

Pastor Mary Jo