

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
January 1, 2012
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: A Child of Promise

Isaiah 61:10–62:3, Galatians 4:4–7; Luke 2:22–40

We often say, “Timing is everything,” and so it is with the church's timing of the celebration of Christ's birth, especially in our culture. Here we are on New Year's Day, still celebrating Christ's birth, and secular America has moved on. Lutheran pastor's Myrna and Robert Kysar wrote an apt summary of this dilemma. “Our culture has a propensity to celebrate one occasion and then to move on quickly. This is especially true of Christmas. From the day after Halloween, the department stores play Christmas music, hoping to get customers in the mood to begin their holiday shopping. But on the day after Christmas, all signs of the holiday disappear. The decorations come down, the music is changed. Christmas cards are on sale at half-price. Most important of all, some stores go into the sales mode in hope of reducing their stock before inventory.” Timing is everything in business, especially at Christmas.

“The church seems strangely out of sync with culture. While Christmas carols fill the shopping mall, the church is singing Advent hymns. While Christmas decorations are being taken down on the day after Christmas, the church is still in the midst of its celebration. Some find it a bit hard to understand the church's celebrating Christmas after December 25th has passed. The Sundays after Christmas are, then, something of a cultural anomaly. What the church year suggests, however, is that the grand celebrations of the tradition, such as Christmas and Easter, are too precious and too rich to be confined to a single day. We need the Sundays after Christmas to understand and absorb what happened in the manger in Bethlehem,” and why we praise God for the birth of the “Child of Promise” who comes to us in God's time.

Time-wise, forget this is New Year's Day in our culture, and continue to think of the birth of Christ in God's time. Listen carefully, as we delve more deeply into the meaning of the birth this Child of Promise. Please place yourself in the shoes of the Biblical people we will encounter. “Emphasis”-Nov./Dec. 1999 pg. 73)

For the people of Judah, God's declaring that the Child of Promise, the Messiah would be born was just what they needed. It came at the right time. In 587 BC, God allowed the Babylonians to destroyed Judah because of its sinfulness and take the people as captives to Babylon. For the next fifty years it seemed to the Jews that God was absent and silent. Then in about 537 BC, God spoke to the prophet who wrote Isaiah 40-66. God had not been absent, but was quietly preparing the Jews for a return to their homeland. As we heard read in the Old Testament lesson, when the word came that they were going back home, “the Judean community broke forth into praise, exulting that it had been clothed with God's salvation, like a bride or groom clothed with their wedding garments. God's people were often pictured in the Old Testament as the bride of God.” “Emphasis”-Nov./Dec. 1999 pg. 76

As a result of this good news, “the Jewish community expressed its faith in God's fidelity to his promises of deliverance” through the Child of Promise, the Messiah. As

surely as the earth brings forth vegetation, so surely will the Lord God cause his saving righteousness and praise to spring up before the eyes of all nations as a witness to them. Judah will be saved, and all people with her.” Judah will be God's light to the world. All nations will be drawn to this light and will also acknowledge that the Lord is their God. The light would be the Child of Promise, the Messiah. “Emphasis”-Nov./Dec. 1999 pg. 76)

However, did that beckoning light, the Child of Promise, the Messiah ever dawn and the Kingdom of God begin on earth in those days? No, “Not in the Old Testament times. That is the strange thing about Old Testament prophecies-many ended up in the air, unfinished and unfulfilled” for those ancient days. “And whenever we read the Old Testament, we always have to ask: Did God keep those glowing promises?” Some were fulfilled then, but not all, for God’s timing is not the same as ours. This created a tension of expectations between God and God’s people. “Emphasis”-Nov./Dec. 1999 pg. 76

This kind of tension of expectations explains the excitement Simeon and Anna had when they saw the six week-old baby in the temple centuries later. “The birth of the Child of Promise, the Messiah was the culmination of a 537-year pregnancy. Again, God's timing defies the human imagination. Simeon and Anna knew that Jesus was the promised Messiah child, and the fulfillment of all of God's prophetic promises of a Messiah. Simeon was a devout old man filled with the Holy Spirit and assured by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he saw God's Messiah. The Holy Spirit leads him to the temple at the very hour when Jesus is being presented. The scene is a very moving one: an old man now ready to die holding a six week-old baby who is, at long last, “the consolation of Israel,” the Child of Promise. The consolation of Israel refers to the messianic age of which Simeon sings. This song is inspired speech and therefore in it the Holy Spirit is declaring Jesus to be the means of salvation for all people, Jew and Gentile,” you and me. [Interpretation-Luke](#), Fred Craddock, pgs.38-40

Luke wrote that Simeon took baby Jesus, the Child of Promise, whose name means “salvation” 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.” This relived some tensions of the expectation of a Messiah, but not all of them.

We also learn from Luke that Jesus the Messiah grew up in a family that meticulously observed the Law of Moses. Luke tells us five times that Joseph and Mary followed these laws exactly. Ironically, “Later in life, Jesus would be in tension with” the expectations of “some interpreters of his tradition,” because Jesus taught and practiced the law as God had originally intended which offended the traditionalist. [Interpretation-Luke](#) , 38-40

According to the Law of Moses, as found in Genesis 17, Jesus was circumcised after 8 days. Then six weeks later, his parents took him to the temple for two ceremonies. One was the purification of Mary. According to Leviticus 12, a mother was to purify herself at the temple after giving birth to a son. The second ritual was the dedication to God of a first-born son according to Exodus 13. Joseph and Mary were poor for they could only offer two turtledoves or pigeons as a sacrifice. Wealthier people also offered a lamb. The dedication and presentation of Jesus in the temple

was similar in meaning to our baptism. It is a confirmation that the child is part of God's covenant or promises of salvation.

"But Simeon's word to Mary is that Israel's consolation, and the salvation of Gentiles will not be without great cost." This means there will be more tensions of expectations. "Jesus will bring the truth to light and in so doing throw all who come in contact with him into a crisis of decision." It will be a crisis of a life or death decision. Jesus' life and teachings cause people to either move closer to God or further away from God. "As much as we may wish to join the name of Jesus only to the positive, satisfying and blessed in life, the inescapable fact is that anyone who turns on" the light of truth "as he did creates shadows." Evil and evil people try to hide in the shadows and the light of Christ exposes them for what they are. This makes them angry enough to try to get rid of the light, or crucify the one who is the light. Jesus' life and teachings cause us to have to choose between his light and evil's darkness; his life-giving expectations of us and our idolatrous expectations of him. [Interpretation-Luke](#), 38-40.

"At any rate, Luke weaves the dark thread of" the tension of expectations "into what has been a bright tapestry of hope, inspired songs and prophecy. Not surprisingly, Luke introduces the shadow-side of Jesus' saving work most beautifully: Simeon has spoken so wonderfully of their child's future that the parents are amazed; Simeon then blesses them; and to Mary he speaks poetically of the price both she and her son must pay. In that reversal of nature **which carries in it pain unlike any other, the parent will bury the child.** When Jesus returns to Jerusalem as an adult, the journey will be what Luke terms his "Exodus" where he fulfills his role as the child of promise who delivers all humanity from the slavery to sin and darkness into the light of salvation. [Interpretation-Luke](#) by Fred Craddock pgs. 38-40

"The truth of Simeon's prophetic witness is confirmed by Anna, a devout prophetess who is at least 84 years-old. Being a woman with the gift of prophecy who lives in the temple area continually in prayer and fasting, she too comes to the scene precisely where and when baby Jesus is being presented. She thanks God and witnesses about the child to all who have kept alive hope for 'the redemption of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, and with it the temple, represent the whole of Israel's hope before God. And Jesus will return to Jerusalem because, as these two have testified, God is leading Israel to the Messiah, just as God is giving the Messiah to Israel. But later, Jesus would weep over the city because it did not recognize the timing of his messianic visitation." The tension of expectations continued. [Interpretation-Luke](#), pgs. 38-40

These two aged saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises." Those who rejected Jesus misunderstood their own tradition and therefore were not capable of recognizing him as the continuation of their own best memory and hope," as the long ago prophesized Child of Promise and salvation. [Interpretation-Luke](#) by Fred Craddock pgs. 38-40

Paul's writing in Galatians adds to the meaning of Jesus' birth, being presented in the temple and being praised as God's Child of Promise, the Messiah. Hear again what Paul wrote, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that

we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you (and I) are no longer a slave, but a child, and if a child, then also an heir, through God." (Galatians 4:4-7)

God's coming to us as the promised Savior Child in God's time means you (and I, both males and females) are no longer slaves to the Law of Moses, but a child and heir (of God). In the time of Jesus and Paul, the slaves of wealthy people had no freedom or rights and were in charge of the male children who also had no rights and no freedom until they were 25. Females never had any rights or freedom. To Paul, slavery and slaves were like the Law of Moses restricting us. But because God came in Jesus, it is his grace, not the Law of Moses that is in charge of us. By the grace of God through Jesus, we are freed to become the children of God. We have been freed from all the barriers of law, stations in life, and gender that once separated us from God. God came in God's time to show us in the flesh of the new born Child of Promise, the Messiah that are we no longer separated from God in any way.

God's ancient promise has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Immanuel, God with us. This is also what Simeon and Anna praised God for as they held the infant Child of Promise, the Messiah. You see, there is much more to the Christmas story than our culture wants to give us time to explore, which creates a tension of expectation. Even one or two Sundays after Jesus' birth are not enough time, so God gives us time, an eternity, to build an everlasting relationship with him.

In this time, in this very hour, let us continue to celebrate the birth and presence of the Child of Promise. Let us join him in the supper he has prepared at the expense of his life laid down for us, just as Simeon prophesized.