

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
"Family and Faith"
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[Isaiah 62:1-3, Luke 2:22-40](#)

Congregational poll: How many of you went to church as a child or a teenager where someone in the church other than your parents knew your name, knew about your life, took an interest in you?

I had a lot of those people in my life growing up in the church. A retired couple, Bob and Vicki Brown, took every opportunity to shower me with affirmation. Parents of other kids in my youth group treated me like one of their own. Kathy, a newly-married young woman who helped out with youth group, was the first to predict my call to ministry. I was celebrated into this faith by a community of faithful people. I recognize how fortunate I was.

Jesus had those people in his life as well. In today's scripture, we encounter Simeon and Anna - faithful, righteous, older folks in the Jewish faith community. They showered Jesus with affirmation. Simeon took Jesus in his arms as though he belonged to him. They predicted his ministry of salvation and redemption. Jesus was celebrated into his faith by a community of faithful people.

Now that I'm on the adult side of this equation, I see the many challenges that prevent some of us from experiencing the gift of the family of faith. I realize that some kids are more difficult to celebrate than others. I understand that we can feel so overwhelmed with our own lives and families that we don't have the time or energy to invest in a child that isn't our own. I get that some people really don't know how to relate to children. I see parents who place barriers between their children and the church community for a variety of reasons. Some don't want others meddling in their parenting for fear of judgment or loss of control. Some simply overschedule their children in an attempt to give them "the very best." Some don't have or desire a faith commitment that costs too much for themselves or their children.

But the real barrier, I think, is that deep down, we all know that this Jesus community is dangerous business. In this Christmas season, we revel in the adorable baby Jesus, cooing in his mother's arms. But as soon as the shepherds and angels and wise men have cleared out, Jesus is on the road to the cross. The ritual sacrifice Mary and Joseph bring to the temple foreshadows the sacrifice Jesus will make for us all. Simeon ominously reveals to Mary that a sword will pierce her soul because of this child.

Commentators point out how righteous Mary and Joseph are in making the trek to Jerusalem for the ritual sacrifice, by finishing everything required by the law of the Lord. They weren't the sort to drop in for the high holy days and check out for the rest of the year. They were the sort that, were they Christian, they'd be here in the pews this Sunday after Christmas.

But I think the true nature of their devotion to God is in their willingness to put their child in God's hands. Maybe they didn't really know what they were getting themselves into or fully understand Simeon's cryptic message. But they came to the temple not just for the purification rite, for the ritual sacrifice. They came to dedicate their firstborn son to the Lord.

Now, this might seem like no big deal, just doing what was customary. But consider what happens to those who are claimed by God, who do God's will in the world. Abraham is called to leave his homeland forever and journey to a place he's never been. Moses is called to stand up to Pharaoh, to turn against his adoptive family, and to wander with God's people as they complain and disobey God in the wilderness for 40 years. David goes up against Goliath. Daniel is thrown into a lion's den. Several of the prophets were killed for speaking the word of God.

As we read these stories from the safety of our sanctuary and Sunday school rooms, we can celebrate these heroes of the faith and be filled with a desire to emulate them.

But we live in a time and place where parents are deemed unfit for not keeping kids in booster seats until they start driver's training. We are not the kind of society that would accept dedicating our children to a God who might call them to fight giants, to travel where we can't reach them, or to so radically disrupt the status quo that their lives are endangered.

That is what is so remarkable about Mary and Joseph. They dedicate Jesus to God. They place him in the arms of an elderly stranger. They allow another stranger to publicly announce their son's secret purpose. They trust not only in God but in the community of God.

Perhaps this trust wasn't easy for Mary and Joseph. They came to Jerusalem. They brought their sacrifice. They intended to do what God asked of them. But they likely had some misgivings. They may have, in fact, been filled with dread.

And into this space steps Simeon. Simeon, so full of trust that God would keep God's promise. So full of hope, waiting patiently into his old age for his eyes to behold God's Messiah. So full of joy in finally encountering that long-awaited salvation, that light of the world.

The scripture doesn't tell us that Simeon was particularly fond of children. We don't know if he had children of his own. We don't know how busy he was, or if he was feeling up to a visit from Jesus on the day he visited the temple.

What we do know is that Simeon had a great deal of patience and a heart attentive to the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit "rested" on Simeon and had revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. The Spirit then led him into the temple to encounter Jesus. Regardless of what barriers might have prevented Simeon from cradling the Holy Infant, Simeon's trust in God, hope in God's redemptive plan, and joy in seeing God's Messiah with his own eyes empowered him to be one of those adults that celebrated Jesus into his faith.

Mary and Joseph are amazed. Amazed at Simeon's trust, hope, and joy. Amazed at one who would take such an interest in their child, who would affirm the truth about him, who would perceive his future.

As we read the story of Christ's birth this past week, I was struck by the last few sentences of Luke's version of this story. When the shepherds come to visit the holy family and share with Mary and Joseph what they have heard and seen, it says that all who heard them were amazed – but not Mary. No, Mary treasured their words and pondered them in her heart, but she was not amazed.

Angels appearing in the sky and directing shepherds to her child's bedside? Interesting. Deeply meaningful, even. But a strange old man talking about her child being a light to the Gentiles and glory to Israel – now that's amazing. Maybe Mary was beginning to wrap her head around the idea that she had given birth to the Jewish Messiah. But the thought that he would somehow enlighten the Gentiles – foreigners who knew nothing of the God of Israel – was an amazing thought indeed. Simeon amazed Mary and Joseph by revealing something to them about their child that they could not see themselves.

Simeon also taught them what real trust is. He tells Mary that her 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 her own soul too. It is interesting that Simeon says "falling and rising" rather than rising and falling. This is not a reference to the mighty being brought low. This is a revelation of the nature of life in Christ – we must fall in order to rise, die in order to live. And that falling and rising will be a sword that pierces the soul of Mary as she must watch the fall of her son before she sees him rise. Simeon, in a way, confirms Mary's worst fears: this faith in God is dangerous business. In order to give her child the very best, she must give him up to the very worst. There is a fall before the rise.

At that moment – as Mary is contemplating the fall that is coming, as she begins to consider how to protect her child, how to shield them both from this prophecy – Anna begins to make a public pronouncement about Jesus, praising God, because he will redeem Israel. Mary's opportunity to quietly shrink away into the shadows, taking Jesus with her, is gone. Jesus and his fate are in the hands of God. He is part of the community of God's people, thanks to those who celebrated him into this faith, for better or worse.

We are the descendants of this family of faith. The family of Mary and Joseph who, though they may have had their fears and challenges, chose to take on the ritual as well as physical responsibility of parenting, an act that allowed Jesus to be claimed by God, affirmed by the community, and called into his future. We are descended from the family of Simeon and Anna, who let nothing stand in their way as they celebrated the Christ child into the faith. This is our family tradition.

Kyle Jones told me a story this week, an episode I'd entirely forgotten because, truthfully, it was a pretty common occurrence. He remembered a meeting at church where I was leading a program or discussion, and I'd had to bring a very young Dean along with me. Dean needed "corralling," as Kyle put it, so Kyle took it upon himself to corral Dean into one of the alcoves in Calvin Hall so I could complete my responsibilities. Each and every time someone has done this for me, I have been grateful – for me and for Dean. Obviously, it has been an enormous help to be supported by so many people in this congregation who have stepped in and helped out with my son. But I am even more grateful that so many people have been involved in celebrating my child into the faith.

And I am even more grateful that my child is not the only one who receives such treatment in this community. At choir practice on Wednesdays, I marvel at how many families are sharing the responsibility of transporting other people's children to and from the church. At our Wednesday dinners, I see older folks checking in with teenagers and children giving hugs to random adults. Our adult ushers have taken on the responsibility of mentoring junior ushers on Sunday mornings. The teens who serve as Elders and Deacons are always encouraged and affirmed by the adults they serve with.

And I'm not sure we talk enough about just how exceptional our church is in this regard. There are many barriers to celebrating children into the faith. But we work hard to overcome them. Courageous and faithful

parents bring their children to be baptized – to be claimed by God. They bring their children to be cared for, and taught, and loved by people they would never speak to outside the church.

And this congregation fulfills the promises it makes when we baptize those children. Even when we don't feel up to it, even if it makes us uncomfortable, even if it sometimes feels awkward - we affirm our children, we know their names and we name their gifts.

Is there more we could do? Of course. Are there those who fall through the cracks? Without a doubt. Do we sometimes say or do the wrong thing or say or do nothing at all? For certain.

But this Sunday after Christmas, I know I am preaching to the choir. I know I am preaching to those who are doing well and want to do better. Otherwise, you'd be at home in your pajamas.

But you are here today because you know the importance of being together as the family of faith. You know what it means to be loved and recognized as someone special in God's eyes. So I mainly want to say, "Thank you, and keep up the good work."

At the end of this story, the holy family returns home. As far as we know, they don't do much of anything out of the ordinary for the next thirty years or so. Teens will often ask about Jesus' childhood, and this is one of the very few references I can point them to. And all it tells us is that Jesus "grew, became strong, filled with wisdom, and God's favor was upon him." The completely ordinary childhood of growing, developing, learning. And the special recognition of God's favor. What an appropriate childhood for one who is both human and divine. Entirely ordinary and entirely exceptional. Perfectly human and perfectly God.

Our children are not Jesus, but they are made in God's image, which makes them both ordinary and exceptional. We celebrate them, not because they have good posture or sit quietly or use good manners or make good grades. We celebrate them because, no matter how ordinary or unexceptional they might seem, God has a purpose for their lives. No matter how exceptionally special they might be, they are no more or less beloved in God's eyes than anyone else. As the family of faith, let us continue to celebrate children into the faith, for the sake of the extraordinary One who comes to us in the most ordinary form, so that we might know the greatness of God's love for us.