

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Community of Memory and Hope

Luke 2:21-40

The proud parents, and their community of faith, had been counting the days. And now, Joseph and Mary's kitchen wall calendar, the one where each month had a different photo of a sacred spot in the holy land, announced that the day had come to dedicate their child to the Lord. That's because for Mary and Joseph, not only was the land holy, but time was holy as well. God-given customs and practices needed to be observed diligently, according to the prescribed calendar. So eight days after his birth, Joseph and Mary packed the diaper bag, fitted Jesus securely into his car seat, and headed to the Temple for the circumcision ceremony.

This was no mere religious formality. Circumcision marked Jesus' acceptance into the covenant community. It was a way of acknowledging and affirming that this child belongs to God and to the family of God's people. The circumcision rite, along with the ceremony of naming, gave the child an identity, a heritage, and a character. Along with the act of child dedication, Luke notes the ceremony of purification, which was required of the mother after the birth of a child. Put these pieces together, and we see that Jesus was born into a family that observed its religious traditions faithfully and practiced them meticulously. This no doubt helped cultivate within Jesus a sense of the sacredness of time and of God's activity across time in order to fulfill his promises.

For Jesus and his family, the calendar was a big deal. It gave structure and flow to their spiritual lives. It gave them a way to remember, retell, and re-experience the story of God's relationship with his people. Being at particular places, on particular days, at particular times, participating in particular acts of devotion, deepened their sense of God's action in history and his involvement in their own lives, as individuals, as a family, and as a community of faith.

We ourselves know the shaping and forming power of the calendar. We've just emerged from a season when you may have felt like the calendar was completely dictating your life. The journey—or better yet, the race—toward December 25 was fueled by the daily round of appointments to keep, tasks to complete, parties to attend, and events to plan. And now, you're six days into a new year. You've started using that new calendar someone gave you for Christmas. For myself, it has been a strange experience this past week, looking at the calendar hanging on our kitchen wall, and seeing so much blank space for the month of January. Something must be wrong. Shouldn't all those little blocks of time be filling up with appointments, events, and plans?

When Joseph and Mary stepped into the Temple for the service of dedication, they carried with them the child in whom all calendars converge. This week-old boy is the one in whom past, present, and future meet. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's past promises, the means of God's present action, and the beginning of the future that God has guaranteed. It's no wonder that Simeon and Anna broke out into praise and thanks when they laid eyes on baby Jesus. Both of them had plenty of days, and plenty of years, under their belts. They

had turned the pages on many a calendar. And now, all those years of waiting and worshiping and working and witnessing had been worth it. God had kept his word. He had come to save his people.

Now that the Savior had arrived, it was like living in a different kind of time. That's because God was doing something new, but in a way it wasn't completely new, because it was the fulfillment of what God had always promised. On the one hand, something had been completed. On the other hand, something was just beginning. But the new would always be connected to the old. Simeon realized this and testified to it. And in the process, he pointed to what would become of this baby.

Simeon knew that there was more to this Savior than just his infancy. That's why he didn't stop after giving Joseph and Mary his blessing. Simeon went on to summarize what was ahead for Jesus. He would bring salvation, but that salvation would always include judgment as well. With redemption would come a great demand. Some would receive Jesus and some would reject him. Some would follow him and some would forsake him. Jesus' path to God's purpose would lead through opposition, suffering, and death, and those who would truly follow him, including his own mother, would have to share in his rejection and sufferings.

You can't predict exactly how a baby is going to react when he or she is in a stranger's arms. During our Christmas trip to visit our relatives in North Carolina, we enjoyed seeing my niece's baby boy for the first time. I gave him a day or two of getting used to my face before trying to hold him. But even that didn't work. After resting on my lap for a minute or two, I could see this worried, frightened look starting to come over his face. Soon the crying and tears followed, and it was time to hand him back over to his mother.

How do you picture baby Jesus when he's in Simeon's arms? Perhaps you envision a serene infant, gazing back at Simeon with affectionate eyes. Not so in a painting by the master artist Giotto (1266/7-1337). In his depiction of today's story, Simeon speaks his familiar words, "You now dismiss your servant in peace." All the while, the infant Jesus is responding the way many babies do when held by an eccentric stranger. His small, dark eyes are narrowed and fixed in alarm as he stares at Simeon. He reaches desperately for his mother Mary, trying to escape from this strange old man. And as he reaches away from Simeon and toward Mary, Jesus' body is basically suspended above the Temple altar. As one commentator has put it, "This very human baby is from the beginning, the eternal sacrifice for the redemption of mankind."¹

Leonard Ravenhill tells about a group of tourists visiting a picturesque village. They walked by an old man sitting beside a fence. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked, "Were any great men born in this village?" The old man replied, "Nope, only babies."² Though Christmas Day has come and gone, we're still in that season of the church's time when we remember that before he reached adulthood and entered more fully into the greatness of his ministry, death, and resurrection, Jesus started out his life in the world the same way that each of us did, as a baby.

And yet, at the same time, barely two chapters into Luke's Gospel, with the manger still a fresh memory, the cross is already starting to come into view. As we listen to the words of Simeon, we're reminded that by his death, Jesus will open up the way of life to the whole world, bringing light wherever there's darkness. But for us to have and experience that life and light, we the saved, like the Savior, must follow the way of the cross. At Christmas, we remember how he became like us, so that we could become like him. What a great and wonderful hope. But that hope is always tied to memory. In other words, what we can be

and what we can do, individually and together, is always inseparable from what Jesus became and what Jesus did, for us.

As I said earlier, our past, our present, and our future meet in Jesus. Our life as a congregation is grounded in what he has done, is doing, and will do. That's important for us to remember as one year comes to a close and another year begins. On this first Sunday of 2019, we bring together memory and hope. We give thanks for God's faithfulness during the past twelve months, and anticipate what his faithfulness will accomplish in each day that we're given in the year ahead.

Here in the early stages of a new year, perhaps what Luke says about the child Jesus at the end of today's Scripture passage can serve as a guide and an inspiration for our own ministry and mission as a congregation. "And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him" (v. 40). Likewise, may our congregation grow, not only inwardly, but outwardly and visibly as well. May we be filled with wisdom. And may the grace of God be upon us.

¹ John W. Dixon, Jr., quoted in Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima, Ohio: CSS, 1987) 50.

² Ravenhill tells this story in *The Last Days Newsletter*.