

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 7, 2024

Faithfulness for the Year Ahead

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, just as you're starting to ease up and catch a breath, a new year is already underway. To begin navigating your way into and through it, you can use that calendar that someone gave you for Christmas.

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.

In the movie *Talladega Nights*, Will Ferrell's character, Ricky Bobby, says the blessing over a table filled with food from Dominos, KFC, and Taco Bell. He opens his prayer, "Dear Lord Baby Jesus." After a few more of his references to the infant Jesus, Ricky's wife Carley interrupts his prayer: "You know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby." But Ricky pushes back, saying he likes "Christmas Jesus" best when saying grace. The "eight pound, six ounce, newborn infant Jesus" is his favorite.

There's a time for celebrating Jesus the baby. In fact, even now, two weeks after our Christmas Eve gatherings, we're still reflecting on the significance of how God has come to us with redemption through the birth of the Messiah. But as Carley said, Jesus did grow up. And no one anticipated this better than Simeon. 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 identify themselves with him and follow him, including his own mother, would have to share in his rejection and sufferings.

During our family's Christmas travels, we visited relatives we hadn't seen in five years. Our niece and her husband have a son who was just an infant the last time we were there. Now he's in kindergarten, and kept all of us on our toes during the holidays. Our nephew and his wife have a son who will be one in about a month. He's on the verge of learning to crawl. At this point, it's more of a slide, particularly across laminate floors. But when he's in someone's arms he's one of the most content children I've ever seen. As he got passed from one person to another during our visit, his mood never seemed to change. Some of this seems to be due to the fact that in his parents' church, a large congregation, he's regularly being handed from one person to another. So when it comes to being in the arms of strangers, he has plenty of experience.

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

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 2024, 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.

American artist James Whistler, who was never known to be bashful about his talent, was once advised that a shipment of blank canvases he had ordered had been lost in the mail. When asked if the canvases were of any great value, Whistler remarked, "Not yet, not yet."² Though James Whistler isn't necessarily a model of humility, there's still truth in what he was saying, truth about potential, truth about what's possible. Right now, we can't say exactly what God will paint on the blank canvas called Grace Baptist Church in the year ahead. We can't describe that image in great detail. But we can say that every stroke of God's brush will be done in faithfulness and steadfast love, in order to bring us to greater and greater maturity in Christ.

The appropriate response to God's faithfulness is our own faithfulness. The kind of faithfulness we see and hear in the individuals in the foreground of today's text. Think of Joseph and Mary in their daily devotion to life with God and with God's people, living into the holiness of time and place, as God worked to accomplish his saving purposes. Think of Simeon, "righteous and devout" (v. 25), living watchfully and patiently, anticipating the coming of God's anointed one, the arrival of God's reign. Think of Anna, who "never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying" (v. 37), practicing the gift of hope day in and day out, living forward into the Lord's promise of redemption. These models of faithfulness can inspire and enliven our own faithfulness to the Lord on this day and each day of the year ahead.

Perhaps what Luke says about the child Jesus at the end of today's Scripture passage can serve as a guide and a motivation for our own lives and 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, outwardly and visibly. 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 *Today in the Word*, December 3, 1992.