

THE RIGHTEOUS BABY

Luke 2:21-40

First Sunday after Christmas (Series B)

December 31, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 21 through 40. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 2, beginning at verse 21, we read in Jesus' name.

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

²² And 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 ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation

³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

THE RIGHTEOUS BABY (Luke 2:21-40)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus fulfilled the Law for us. And he started at infancy. This is quite impressive. Babies generally do not do a whole lot for other people, I mean, besides giving us smiles and laughs by their inherent cuteness. But they don't pay rent. They don't wash dishes or mow the lawn. When I became a father, I couldn't believe it, but they don't even clean up after themselves. You have to do it all for them. As far as actual contributions to society or the functioning of a household, they don't do anything. They can't; they're babies. But Jesus, as an infant, was already serving us by fulfilling the Law on our behalf. This is quite impressive.

It's mysterious too. Though he is the Son of God, and all the fullness of deity dwelt within him (Col. 1:19; 2:9), he humbled himself to our humanity. He humbled himself to the intellectual capability of an infant. So he didn't even know he was doing anything for us. But he was. Throughout his entire childhood, he was fulfilling the Law on our behalf.

The childhood of Jesus is something I would really like to know more about. What exactly is it like to have a sinless child? We have a few stories from early childhood, like his birth, this account of his first visit to the temple, the visit of the Magi, and the flight to Egypt in *The Gospel of Matthew*. And we have one story from when he was twelve about when Joseph and Mary forgot him in Jerusalem. The rest is rather mysterious.

As an infant, I suppose there wouldn't have been any noticeable difference between Jesus and any other child. When he grew up a little bit, there would be a noticeable difference in the sense that he was perfectly obedient to his parents. That is certainly strange. But he wasn't doing any miracles yet. As an infant, though, he was purely passive, just like every other infant. And he cried, just like every other infant.

You know, there's that Christmas hymn, "Away in a Manger." It's a good hymn. We sing it in our house. But there's one line in that kind of bugs me. It's the line that says, "But little Lord Jesus, *no* crying he makes."

Sometimes we wrongly think that a good baby is one that doesn't cry that much. So if Jesus was the perfect baby, he must not have cried at all. That's not true. Babies are supposed to cry. It's how they tell us what they need, and it demonstrates the suffering they endure. So Jesus cried. He even cried when he was a grownup. He cried when his friend Lazarus died (John 11:35). And from the cross he cried to his Father, "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). Of course Jesus cried when he was a baby. So in our house, we still sing "Away in a Manger," but we change it to say, "But little Lord Jesus, *some* crying he makes." He cried. And I'm sure he wailed like every baby boy does when he was circumcised on the eighth day. He cried, because he suffered everything that little babies suffer.

Nobody really knows exactly what babies experience. By the time we grow up, we forget what that was like. But try to imagine what it would be like to have something wrong, but you don't know exactly what it is. Your bottom feels weird, or your stomach feels empty. But you don't even know what a stomach is, and you don't know what the solution is, and you don't know how to tell anyone what's wrong, and you don't know when or if anyone will fix it for you. That would be enough to make a grownup cry. Jesus suffered that. Does that make him special? No. It makes him just like every other baby. And that's the point. He became like every other baby to suffer the exact same things that every human being suffers. He suffered under the Law, and he suffered obediently in order to fulfill the Law for us.

Jesus did not drop into the world as a thirty-something-year-old man. He didn't just show up for the crucifixion and resurrection. He showed up for the whole life. He came as one of us. He

THE RIGHTEOUS BABY (Luke 2:21-40)

came to experience and suffer everything we experience and suffer. And he did it to fulfill the Law on our behalf. Because it's not enough to just take away our sin. If Jesus merely takes away our sin, then we would be left with nothing. It wouldn't be bad, but it also wouldn't be good. So he gives us his righteousness in place of our sin. It's the great exchange. So Jesus suffers under the Law and fulfills the Law for us, so that he can give that fulfillment to us. We see this in several places in this passage.

First, Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day. This was in accordance with the covenant God made with Abraham in Genesis 17 (v. 12). This, as far as we know, was the first shedding of Jesus' blood. The covenant of circumcision marked a child as a member of God's covenant with Abraham. Now Jesus didn't really need this, because he is the God who made that covenant with Abraham. But he suffered it on our behalf.

The next thing we see is Joseph and Mary taking him to the temple. This would have occurred when Jesus was forty days old.

There was a double purpose for bringing Jesus to the temple. The first was to present him to the LORD. Luke describes this by quoting Exodus. "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord" (2:23; Ex. 13:2, 12). Every firstborn male of the sons of Israel belonged to the LORD. God didn't actually take the firstborn sons away from their families. But the Jews would present them to the LORD at the temple as an acknowledgement of who they really belonged to.

So every time before Jesus, when families would present their firstborn sons to the Lord, it was a foreshadowing of Jesus' presentation. Finally, the Son of God was presented at the temple. And we remember that the whole point of the temple was to be a place where sacrifices were offered to God. And that's the point of Jesus being presented there. All the other baby boys went home again with their parents. And Jesus did too, but his presentation at the temple looked forward to the day that he would offer himself for the sin of the world.

The other purpose of the visit was for Mary's purification. After giving birth, every Israelite mother was required to offer a sacrifice for purification. After giving birth, they were considered ritually unclean, and they had a time of purification before offering a sacrifice at the temple. And we should note that "unclean" does not mean the same thing as "sinful." There were several reasons that an Israelite would be considered "unclean" without having done anything wrong. Sometimes they were deemed unclean for having done something good, like burying a relative or giving birth to a child. So "unclean" does not mean that they did something sinful. Rather, the category of uncleanness captures the broader aspect of sin, that we are not right and we live in a world that is not right. We remember that childbirth is the way it is because of the fall into sin. God said to the woman, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16). So the Old Testament label of "unclean" does not condemn a woman for giving birth. Rather, it acknowledges that the painful and violent experience of childbearing is not the way this world is really supposed to be, and we are not the way we are supposed to be. And if things are not the way they are supposed to be, then there will be a reconciliation when God makes right what was wrong. So the ritual process of going from unclean to clean looks forward to the day when God will make all things right.

There's an interesting detail in Mary's purification that we might not catch without some Old Testament background. And it is very worth catching. Luke says that they went "to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves, or two young

pigeons” (2:24). But if we look back to Leviticus 12, where the LORD commanded this sacrifice, we see that two turtledoves or two young pigeons is actually the alternate sacrifice. First, God commanded that they should bring a lamb and one pigeon or turtledove. That was the requirement. But God makes an exception for the poor. He says, “If she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons” (Lev. 12:8). This little detail is how we know that Joseph and Mary were poor. They did not have enough money to buy a lamb.

God the Father could have sent his Son to any family. And we might think that a loving father would send his son to a rich family. But God did not. It was the will of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to send the Son into a poor family. And this reveals the purpose of the Son coming into the world. It was to suffer. He did not come to be praised. There were a few faithful who did praise him. But that wasn’t the point. The point was to suffer. And those who praised him best understood this.

Perhaps the best example of this was Simeon. We assume from the way he speaks that he was probably an elderly man. “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (2:26). When Joseph and Mary came into the temple, he recognized Jesus. How? We don’t know exactly. Perhaps he had heard the report of the shepherds (2:20). Or it could have been a divine revelation, like he’s just standing there, then he sees Jesus and knows. We don’t really know how. Whether it was ordinary or supernatural, it was still the Holy Spirit who revealed it to him.

So he comes up to Jesus, takes him in his arms, and blesses God. This must have been strange for Mary. New moms don’t really like random strangers picking up their babies. But whatever. Simeon says,

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel” (2:29-32).

To paraphrase Simeon, he says, “Now I can die satisfied.” That’s what it means when he says, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.”

I use these verses sometimes as a blessing after the Lord’s Supper. It might seem strange, or it might go over your head if you don’t know the reference. “Now you are letting your servant depart in peace” does not simply mean that we can leave and go about our lives in peace. More than that, it means that we are prepared to die. And there is no better time to say this than upon receiving the Lord’s Supper. Now, that doesn’t mean that you weren’t prepared before. But in a similar way to Simeon, we have beheld the Lord of Heaven and Earth in a humble form. Simeon saw the eternal Son of God in a poor infant. He held God in his arms. We receive that same Son of God in the humble forms of bread and wine. And having received him, we can say, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.” That is, “I am ready to die, knowing that Jesus has made peace between God and me, and he has delivered that peace to me personally.”

How Jesus makes that peace would be painful, not just for himself, but also for those who loved him, like his mother.

Simeon’s praise includes some foreboding when he says, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (2:34-35). This is about the cross. Many in Israel would believe in Jesus and be saved. Many would reject him.

THE RIGHTEOUS BABY (Luke 2:21-40)

They would condemn Jesus and demand his execution. This was the plan of God all along, but it would be painful, especially for Mary. We know from *The Gospel of John* that Mary was there at the cross (19:25-27). She watched the whole thing. What could possibly be worse than that? I think the most painful thing a person could endure is having to watch their child die. At least most parents would say that they would rather die. But Mary doesn't just watch her son die. She sees him executed as a criminal. She hears people mock her son while he silently suffers. That's the sword that pierces her soul, and I can't imagine a sharper sword.

Mary might not understand exactly what Simeon means. Simeon might not even understand what his words mean. But it's still strange to speak of such things when a child is only a few weeks old. But it prepares Mary, at least a little bit, for the pain of that sword. Perhaps she will remember Simeon's words as she sees her son pierced, and she feels as if she is being pierced with him, and know that the crucifixion is not a tragic accident. But it's actually the purpose for which God sent his Son into the world. And if it's really the reason God sent his Son, then it won't end badly. The way Mary feels at the cross is not the way she will always feel. As Jesus fell, he would also rise on the third day, proving that he has conquered sin and swallowed death. Instead of his story ending as a condemned criminal, he will be praised and honored for all eternity as the Savior of the world.

There was also a prophetess named Anna. She was another member of the faithful, like Simeon. And she spoke of Jesus to all who were waiting for the Christ to come.

Then they returned home, not to Bethlehem, but to Nazareth in Galilee (2:39). If you're keeping track and trying to harmonize the events in the different gospels, Luke doesn't say exactly when they go to Nazareth. Matthew fills in the gap that Joseph took Mary and Jesus to Egypt first to escape from King Herod, who wanted to kill Jesus (Matt. 2:13-15). Then he also reports that they settled in Nazareth upon their return (Matt. 2:19-23).

And Luke says that Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him" (2:40). This is such a strange thing to say about the Son of God. God cannot grow; he is infinite. He cannot become strong, because he is already omnipotent. He cannot be filled with wisdom, because he already possesses all wisdom. God cannot do these things, but he did.

Here we return to our central theme for today, that Jesus fulfilled the Law on our behalf, even from infancy. All throughout childhood, he fulfilled the Law for us. When we grow up, when we go through being babies, toddlers, and children, we do it with sin. We can't help it, but we do. We are inherently selfish. We think everyone around exists to serve us. So we tantrum. We steal toys from our siblings. We refuse to share with them, but demand that they share with us. Anyone who thinks children are innocent has never tried to parent one and doesn't remember their own childhood very well.

God has commanded us, "Honor your father and your mother" (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16). But we have not. We might have moments when we do, but we certainly have moments when we don't. And if our results are only mixed at best, have we really obeyed God's commandment? Certainly not. And that's only one of the commandments.

Jesus fulfilled this and every commandment for us. So God sent his Son to be born as a human child, so that he would grow as a sinless child, and, therefore, fulfill the Fourth Commandment for us. So when he died and rose again for us, he did not merely take away our

THE RIGHTEOUS BABY (Luke 2:21-40)

sin, but he gave his perfect righteousness to us. And now you stand before God with the perfect righteousness of his Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.