

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 1st Sunday after Christmas, Dec. 28, 2014

Seeing God in the Face of a Child

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December 28, 2014

Luke 2:22-40

As I was reading today's scripture passage which describes how Mary and Joseph presented their newborn son, Jesus, at the temple in accordance with Jewish custom, I couldn't help but think of our custom today for parents to present their infant children for baptism in the church.

That may seem a bit farfetched to some people but it really isn't. When parents today bring their children for baptism, they are presenting their children to God and are pledging to teach the faith to their children and to dedicate them to Christ.

The baptismal ceremony often includes the words:

*"O Lord, uphold this child by your Holy Spirit. Give this child the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever"*¹

And directly addressing the child, the pastor says, *"Child of the covenant, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."*²

Marked as Christ's own forever! The child is being given to God. Did you ever think about that?

Does God ever acknowledge that gift?

In my mind, most certainly. I can see God in the face of a child at baptism. I certainly saw God in the face of our grandson Emmett when I baptized him about three years ago. Without question, I saw God in Hunter's face when Mo and Daniel presented her for baptism a year and a half ago.

We present our children for baptism and God is certainly present when we do.

When the infant Jesus was presented at the temple, he wasn't baptized then but he was presented to God in much the same manner.

According to Jewish custom newborn children were sacred to God. First born sons were presented to God in the temple and the parents offered a lamb or a pigeon as a burnt offering and a pigeon as a sin offering. Those who could afford it would offer

the lamb as the burnt offering. The poor would offer the pigeon as Mary and Joseph did.

When they presented Jesus to the Lord and offered their sacrifice something happened which was quite different than what was expected. Two prophets, Simeon and Anna were in the temple and witnessed what was happening and both of them saw God in the face of the infant Jesus.

Simeon was very old and devout and had been assured by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Christ, the Messiah. He went to the temple that day guided by the Holy Spirit at the very hour when Jesus was being presented. He held the Christ Child and saw God in his face. He saw the consolation of Israel, the beginning of the Messianic age. He saw Jesus as the means by which all will be saved, both Jews and Gentiles.

But, Simeon saw that this salvation would not come easily. He saw, in the words of William Barclay³, *"It (will be) the hand of Jesus which lifts a man out of shame into glory"* but *"He will meet much opposition. Towards Jesus Christ there can be no neutrality. We either surrender to him or we are at war with him. And it is the tragedy of life that our pride often keeps us from making that surrender which leads to victory."*

In other words, we need not to lose sight of God in the face of Jesus.

The other witness to Jesus' presentation at the temple was a prophetess named Anna. She too was very elderly. Some Bible translations suggest that she was eighty four years of age. Others seem to say that she had been a widow for eighty four years. Whichever it was, she was well advanced in years and had lived at the temple since her husband had died.

We don't know much about Anna except what our scripture reading tells us. According to William Barclay⁴, *"She was a widow. She had known sorrow and she had not grown bitter."*

"She spent her life in God's home with God's people. God gave us his church to be our mother in the faith. We rob ourselves of a priceless treasure when we neglect to be one with his worshipping people."

"(Anna) never ceased to pray. Public worship is great; but private worship is also great. As someone has truly said, 'They pray best together who first pray alone.' The years had left Anna without bitterness and in unshakable hope because day by day she kept contact with him who is the source of strength and in whose strength our weakness

*is made perfect*⁴

Anna too saw God in the face of the infant Jesus.

Fred Craddock⁵ said, *“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 ... God is doing something new, but it really is not new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God’s keeping an old promise. As the risen Christ would later say to his disciples, ‘Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ (Luke 24:44). Anna and Simeon are a portrait of the Israel that accepted Jesus. Those who rejected him misunderstood their own tradition and therefore were not capable of recognizing him as the continuation of their own best memory and hope.”*

This is the Christmas season, *“... the celebration of the coming of Christ and His redemption.*

“Simeon and Anna celebrated the coming of Jesus and his salvation when Joseph and Mary brought him to the temple as a baby. Simeon, a man who was told by the Spirit that he would not die before he saw the Messiah, declared: ‘My eyes have seen your salvation.’ When Anna, a widow who served God, saw Jesus, she spoke of him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

“We may experience disappointments or heartache during the Christmas season, but Jesus and His salvation always give us reason to celebrate.”⁶

Look around. Look into Hunter’s face. Look and you will see God.

Amen.

1. Holy Baptism and Services for the Renewal of Baptism, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1985).
2. *ibid*
3. William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, rev. ed., The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975.
4. ibid
5. Fred B. Craddock, Luke: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1973.
6. Anna Cetas, Our Daily Bread, December 15, 2013.