

Luke 2:22-40 How do we know... who knows?

I am relying heavily on Mary Schertz's commentary on Luke for understanding this passage.

My parents were both born into poor families. My grandmother was a single mother at age 18 in an Amish community where that situation was very shameful. Luckily her parents allowed her to continue living at home until my mother was 16 and they finally moved out on their own. Grandma hadn't been allowed to go past 8th grade and she didn't get her GED until my mother was an adult.

My father grew up as the oldest child in a large family that also struggled financially. In fact, he had to quit school at age 16 to go to work to help his family stay afloat in the late 50's/early 60's and ended up going to night school to get a GED. But he was the first with that level of education and the first to go to college. He of course had to pay every cent of college room and board from his own earnings and also had to drop out for a year to help his family make ends meet.

Perhaps being poor is what drew my Grandparents away from the Mennonite church they had started attending with their pre-teen boys and toward the Pentecostal churches after my dad left home. The Mennonites in this central Illinois farming community were preaching modest, quiet discipleship and service

for others. The Pentecostals were preaching material abundance and reward for faithfulness in this world and salvation for your soul in eternity. If you were poor, and hadn't been raised in any church, which would you choose?

German theologians have used a term, *Sitz im Leben*, that many other theologians around the world have adopted to describe literally your location in life. *Sitz* comes from *sitzen* which means to sit, as in to sit in a chair. Imagine if you are reading the Bible in a chair that is simple, sturdy but not fancy and the ground upon which that chair sits is beat up linoleum or even dirt. Or whether your chair is a fluffy, soft, cushy recliner and you have lush carpet or hardwood floors. What do you see outside your window? Tall, cheaply made concrete apartment buildings with no infrastructure, no sanitation, people with no jobs? Like the refugee camps for Palestinians in Lebanon that have been there for 70 years. Or like me, you look outside and see a public high school, paved roads, power lines and decent cars parked in your driveway and your neighbors'. My point is, I don't know how to read the Bible like a poor person because I've never been one. I know that isn't everyone's story in this room and I bring this up to say that our *Sitz im Leben* influences how we understand God and the prophecies about Jesus.

The temple story in this part of Luke 2 reminds us of the *Sitz im Leben* of this family, which is the Jewish community in which Jesus was raised and in which Mary and Joseph parented. It was the religious custom to present their baby for circumcision while Mary would be purified from giving birth.

Luke is careful to point out to us that these religious rituals were according to the law of the Lord. For a poor family like this, this journey so soon after the journey to Bethlehem surely would have caused no small sacrifice. We know that they are poor because they are substituting pigeons/Turtledoves for the more traditional sacrificial animals. And the physical hardship imposed upon a new mother and her infant child there's also considerable. But this is what they must do to fulfill the Law. And Luke wants his audience to know that Jesus is qualified to be the Messiah for Jewish people and showing how faithful his family was to the Law was part of that.

Our guiding question today is how do we know who knows? Who has the information, the truth, the wisdom we are looking for to understand what God is doing in the world? Who can we trust? Who should we listen to? Let's take a look at some of the characters in today's story.

A new character enters the story—Simeon. An elderly, righteous man, whom the Spirit chose to reveal something special. We don't know how long Simeon was waiting for this promise to be fulfilled but he apparently had an inner witness telling him to get to the Temple asap to see it with his own eyes.

“Peace on earth and goodwill to all” was just sung by the heavenly chorus to the shepherds and here we see Simeon saying that he can now die in peace, having seen the Messiah. Isn't it interesting that it says he was waiting for the comfort/consolation of Israel and then prophesies something that doesn't sound entirely comforting?

Apparently, it doesn't seem to mean that everyone will now live in harmony with God or one another. Simeon prophesies that Jesus will be a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Israel. This is an inclusive salvation! But it isn't a feel-good salvation, and it isn't universal salvation, because he goes on to say that some will rise and some will fall; meaning that some will receive this Savior of the world and others will not. There will be opposition, even to the point of Mary feeling like her soul has been stabbed.

We see this twist in Messianic expectations play out in the Gospels and in the book of Acts, where sometimes Gentiles are more open and receptive to Jesus'

message than people who seem to be the faithful shoe-ins in the Jewish community. Just like in Mary's song in Luke 1, what is perceived as Good News for some turns out to be hard news for others. Simeon's prophecy echoes and affirms Mary's vision. They seem to be in the know and are trustworthy witnesses to what God is going to do through Jesus.

It is interesting that Simeon speaks these words of dread directly to Mary, even though Joseph would have been there too. She seems to have been chosen to walk the journey with Jesus in a more intimate way than Joseph, which makes sense if you see this as setting the stage for all the other up-endings of expectations and norms that Jesus upsets in his earthly ministry.

Next up: Anna. The fact that there is a female prophet in the Temple who was there day and night is very unexpected in this story. Like Mary and Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke we now have a 3rd strong female character, Anna. Anna is an aged prophet in the temple and speaks to everyone whom she meets about Jesus as the Liberator of Israel. They break the mold of the stereotypical woman remaining quietly in the private sphere. We may take it for granted in our day but in the patriarchal world of the text we see this remarkable vision of women practicing their faith and freedom directly without the permission or mediation of men.

They are their own people cooperating with God in God's mission. Let's add Anna to the circle of witnesses of people who know what God is doing in Jesus.

One time in Germany, we were having a discussion about the place of women in ministry with some people who had returned to Germany after having lived in the former Soviet Union for many years. These families had just come to faith recently and found it culturally very difficult to imagine that women could be in leadership. I remember their shock when we read together the story of Anna, the prophet. One man assumed that this woman, Anna, was maybe a cleaning person in the Temple and was having a hard time believing that she was a real prophet. And that Simeon was not the prophet, but a faithful and devout man, upon whom the Spirit rested while he was in his home. Talk about a role reversal.

These Bible stories get reduced to feel good nostalgia especially at Christmas time. But, if read closely, really aren't feel-good at all. They are complex, Difficult words, Challenging our desire for simplistic and convenient narratives.

God's redemptive story is full of conflict and pain, challenging the hierarchies of power. Israel was occupied at that time and people really wanted a military leader to come and force the Romans out and set them free. Jesus was a big

disappointment to many. What do we do when we are disappointed by Jesus?

Sometimes it's hard to even admit that we are disappointed.

We can learn from Mary as she hears someone else echoing the very things she said and adding a warning to her about the pain she will suffer because of her son.

The young woman who burst out in song earlier, is now silent. Perhaps she has no words. The text says she and Joseph are amazed, even though they already have been told much the same message. Perhaps it's surprising to hear someone else say it. Surprising to know that God would reveal this to others, not just you.

Surprising because now that the baby is born, it's just that much more real.

Profound silence is sometimes the emotional and intellectual space that we all need to go to in order to reflect and come to grips with the good news/hard news of Jesus. Silence and reflection are how we still our minds from endless chatter and endless effort to know who to trust. Who to listen to. Who to follow.

One thing I learned in seminary was that the vast majority of people living in Palestine at the time of Jesus would have lived hand to mouth, at the survival level, with barely enough. Mary, Joseph and their children were no exception. As mentioned previously, Luke subtly shares this reality with us through telling us that they brought two turtledoves, which was the provision for poor families in

the book of Leviticus. For Jesus, his concern for the poor throughout his ministry, isn't a cause for those out there, on whom he has pity, but for himself and probably almost everyone he knows. He has lived it. It's his life as a poor person that shapes how he understands and explains God's mission in the world to set things right.

This is the context that God chose for Jesus. This isn't random. He could have been born to a wealthy Jewish family, rare though that was at the time. He could have been born to a rabbinical family. But he was born in an everyday low-income Jewish family. And he was God's chosen instrument to bring salvation and redemption to the cosmos.

Closing: What about you? What about me? How does our Sitz im Leben, metaphorically the chair in which we're sitting, affect the way we hear and understand the life and ministry of Jesus? It seems to me that if you can really identify with Jesus coming from a poor family, receiving his message might be truly comforting and you can look forward to the glory of redemption, of things being set right in this world and the next. If you sometimes struggle with the hard words of Jesus, stay with that discomfort for it might just be the light of revelation to you.

How do we know who knows? We can tell whose hunger and thirst for righteousness, whose anger over injustice has been transformed by the joy of knowing Jesus and being in his presence, like Simeon. We can tell who has been with Jesus and can't quit talking about him to everyone she meets, like Anna. We can tell who has quieted their own opinions long enough to listen to the voices of others, who can accept painful truths and ponder them in faith and wait for God's timing. We can tell. These are the ones we trust, we listen to, we lean on. They help us see the light of revelation and hold together the joy and the suffering of the world.

We go into 2024 holding complicated and complex situations together. It is hard work. It is hard to maintain peace and joy in the face of such terrible suffering. But taking time to be with Jesus, to receive him like Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna did, can give us the strength to carry the heaviness with love and hope. To believe that God can bring something good out of every mess. Something worth living for, fighting for and hoping for.