

Mary and Joseph face choices in raising Jesus.
 I see comparisons between their choices
 and those young parents face today
 in trying to raise children in a faith tradition
 when the surrounding culture is thoroughly secular.
 Will we have prayer before meals?
 Will we take our children to worship?
 Will we have our children baptized?
 Even more than in my parents' generation,
 parents today nurture children in a secular realm
 devoid of the presence of the holy.
 In Biblical times, children were little more than chattel.
 Today we are of two minds about our children.
 In one way, our materialistic culture promotes
 every whim to clothe and amuse our children –
 toys, video games, fashions, rock stars.
 But in areas vital to children, such as housing,
 family stability, and healthcare,
 we serve our children poorly.
 It is said, the measure of a nation's greatness
 is how it treats the most vulnerable of its citizens –
 the very old, the physically weak and mentally feeble,
 the very young, and women, especially mothers.
 Most of the persons who bed down with relatives
 or in homeless shelters every night are children.
 Most of the persons who occupy
 shelters for abused women are children.
 Most of the persons who lack insurance
 for basic medical care are children,
 particularly when Congress fails to fund
 the child-health safety net.
 And when recession takes away paychecks
 from families, it is children who suffer the most.
 Only in education do we even try to put children first.
 In education, the most vulnerable children
 are first among the first, in fact.
 But we can do better.
 We can pay attention to the littlest among us,
 the ones without advocates or votes.

We can look at a hungry child,
 and see the face of Jesus.
 We can see all children
 the way Mary and Joseph see Jesus.
 The presentation of their son in the temple
 is a real sacrifice on their part.
 Life in general is hard for devout Jews at this time.
 The nation of Israel is under strict Roman control.
 Everyone, whether they be rich or poor,
 has to pay taxes to Rome – high taxes.
 The tax burden falls harder on the working poor
 like Mary and Joseph,
 families without land.
 The Jewish religious establishment has adapted
 to imperial control by serving as middle-men.
 The same officials who collect tithes
 also collect Roman taxes on top of tithes.
 They keep a little of both for themselves.
 A Jewish elite enjoys special privilege and wealth
 at the expense of ordinary folk
 like Mary and Joseph.
 Jesus' roots are among the common people,
 the poor struggling to survive
 in a system stacked against them.
 Jesus is born into a political-economic system
 that works against lower-class families like his.
 Is it any surprise that the adult Jesus preaches,
 Blessed are the poor?
 Is it any surprise that he welcomes little children,
 for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven?
 Neither Mary nor Joseph is used to
 a high standard of living or social prestige
 They are just ordinary folk setting up household.
 Ordinary folk with an extraordinary new baby
 to rear under the laws of the Jewish faith.
 Because the angel Gabriel has told each of them,
 Joseph and Mary know their child
 is the one chosen by God to lead Israel one day.

So they intend to raise Jesus properly in faith, beginning with his circumcision, and then, since he’s a firstborn son, his dedication to the Lord. Joseph and Mary have traveled far from Nazareth to be here. Yet in the eyes of the Temple, their dutiful obedience is viewed more as a revenue stream than a pious act. The text mentions that Jesus’ parents provide a sacrifice when they arrive at the Temple, a sacrifice that they can ill afford. They head for the stalls and choose two turtledoves. We know something about dedicating a son to the Lord from the O.T. story of Hanna, the woman who prayed year after year that she would dedicate her son to the Temple if God would only let her conceive. She does give birth to a son, names him Samuel, and presents him to the priest, Eli. True to her vow, Hanna dedicates Samuel’s life to service in the temple. Hanna was exceptionally pious. In the second Temple era, Jewish parents could dedicate their firstborn sons, then “redeem” them from lifetime service with a monetary payment to the priest. Mary and Joseph take a different approach. They do not redeem Jesus upon presentation, because they know he himself is the Redeemer. Nor do they see a need to dedicate him to service in the Temple, since they know he is destined for God’s service. They head directly to the Temple altar, where Joseph will present the baby. Along the way, they are met by a God-fearing man who blesses their son and a wise old prophetess who witnesses to his greatness. Luke leads us to understand that the encounters with Simeon and Anna

(whose Hebrew name would be Hanna) are not entirely by chance. Divine providence is at work. The Holy Spirit directs Simeon and Anna to be at this place, at this moment, to seek out this particular child. Simeon is a devout and righteous man who has been told by the Holy Spirit that he will not die before he sees the Messiah. Anna is a childless widow, probably dependent on the charity of Temple patrons with whom she prays and fasts. Each of them, in their rock-solid belief, is able to look into the face of a poor infant boy and see the divine. Their belief is the pre-condition for their seeing. “Picture the old man, chuckling, giddy with joy. Perhaps he gazes with streaming tears on his cheeks, or is lost in transfixed wonder. In whatever way, he is so very happy.” (That was from a 2002 article by John Stendahl.) It is enough, he sings. Now he can die in peace. His song has become a sort of Christian Dayyenu, that great Passover song which proclaims that each little act of salvation is sufficient. He sees the future of Israel in his arms. Dayyenu. It is sufficient. Shalom. And then Anna, approaching the end of her days, adds her own joy and praise to the moment. She’ll be telling everybody about this baby whom she saw for just a few minutes. She comes across this poor, religious family straying into the Temple complex like so many hundreds of others. With eyes of belief, however, Anna, too, sees God’s shalom. For Simeon and Anna, **Believing Is Seeing.**

Believing that Israel’s savior is coming soon, they are able to see that savior in a tiny child, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Simeon effuses:

“My eyes have seen your salvation . . . a light of apocalypse to the Gentiles and of magnificence to your people, Israel.”

We must note the darker implications as well. Hope for Messiah was revolutionary, anti-Roman. Simeon’s inclusion of the whole world is a counter-claim to the global ambitions of Empire. *Pax Romana* was the Roman’s boast of global peace, through power.

But Simeon’s prophecy of revelation and glory to Gentiles as well as Jews underscores the messianic hope of overcoming the Empire, and specifically Emperor Augustus. That Simeon knows this ... is evident in the prophecy he directs specifically to Mary: “This child is destined for the downfall as well as the resurrection of many in Israel, and he will be a portent (*shmei/on*) that is denied, so that the opinions of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your deepest feelings, too.”

Opaque words to Mary, perhaps, but prophetic. Dominant powers who cannot recognize “salvation” in anything other than power by the sword will be unmasked by Jesus. This prophecy refers not only to Rome but also the claims of Jewish nationalists advocating liberation from Rome by the sword: Zionists and Zealots, in fact, do oppose Jesus throughout the Gospel record. This little set-piece with Simeon and Anna, unique to the third Gospel, prepares us for the arc of Luke’s entire narrative. Jesus’ career from birth to crucifixion to resurrection is all foreshadowed in the prophetic words of Simeon and Anna.

Each of us is a child of God.
 Each of us is dedicated to God in our baptism.
 Once accepted in baptism, we no longer belong only to our families, but to the household of God.
 Having all the wealth in the world is nothing compared with living as members of God’s family.
 As God intervenes with Anna and Simeon so God intervenes with people like all of you, church-people on the cusp of new ministry.
 God is cradling this particular congregation and blessing it for the salvation of many.
 Twenty-eight days from now, your new pastor will be ordained to ministry and his pastorate will begin in earnest among you.
 I wish you all the peace, the perfection, the shalom, that Simeon and Anna realize when they embrace the baby Jesus.

Are you familiar with the sculptures of Arnaldo Pomodoro? (The name is Italian for tomato.) His sculptures are bronze, ranging from a meter to 4 meters in diameter. There is one in New York City, donated to the United Nations by the Italian government. The overall silhouette is a perfectly-formed sphere. One side of the sphere is shiny and fairly complete. But as you walk around it, you see craters and cavities, deep into the surface. There are wheels and gear-teeth and carvings that remind one of cave dwellings. A fractured sphere struggles to be free from within. The Pomodoro spheres are disturbing. When I saw one at a Museum in Washington, I was repulsed. It struck me as natural perfection eroded by unnatural forces, eating away at it. As I reflect on Anna and Simeon, however, I come to a new way of seeing the Pomodoroes.

Simeon sings, “Sovereign Lord,
 you are releasing me, your servant,
 to depart in peace,” in shalom.
 He can die, his life completed, finished,
 fulfilled, made whole, restored. Why?
 Because he has looked into that tiny face –
 those two big orbs – and he has seen salvation.
 Through faith, he has seen the peace of the world,
 the whole world, both Jewish and Gentile.
 A glimmer, yes. Incomplete, yes.
 Light just emerging. Salvation not yet fully formed.
 But shalom, nevertheless.
 What Simeon sees in those orbs of Jesus’ face
 is what I can choose to see in a Pomodoro sphere.
 I believe an artist lives to create, not destroy.
 Believing this, I can now see his spheres
 in the process of becoming.
 Those disturbing cogs and wheels are the signs
 of a perfect form emerging from the inside out.
 Believing, I can perceive the spheres being filled in,
 completed, fulfilled, made whole, restored.

I can see ordinary events of meals and holidays,
 even the ordinary drudgeries of life –
 dirty dishes, queues of email, taxes –
 as part of God’s work of creating shalom.
 In the ruts, I see the struggle to find shalom.
 I celebrate the presence of God in the ordinary,
 even the tiresome and the painful.
 I recognize divine mystery in every human being.
 The fearsome, messy work of shalom is beginning.
 In a wriggling baby, Simeon and Anna
 see God starting the work of filling in, finishing,
 making whole the Kingdom that God intends.
 The salvation this baby will work
 is still only a potentiality;
 the truths he reveals will remain hidden
 for some years.
 And Christ’s work is not yet complete.
 But for people of faith,
 Believing is Seeing.
 Hallelujah! Amen.