

Luke 2:21-52

In these early chapters, Luke has especially selected vignettes to set the overall tone for his narrative of Jesus' life and ministry.

Day 1: Luke 2:21-52 The Piety of Jesus' Origins

Jesus' story reaches its climax in the account of his crucifixion as a heretic, a pretend Messiah, rejected by Jewish leadership and temple hierarchy. Luke reaches back to his origins to show the falsity of the eventual accusation and execution by highlighting the piety of Jesus' early days.

The temple was the center of first-century Jewish piety, and ties this section together: in the first vignette, Jesus is dedicated in the temple (2:21-40); the second has him discussing theology with the rabbis (2:41-52). There we meet the prophet Simeon, who comes to meet the Christ-child (2:27), the prophetess Anna who never leaves but worships night and day (2:37), and the rabbis who are amazed at the boy's understanding (2:46). Notably, this is also where this Gospel ends, in the temple, with believers worshipping the risen Christ (24:53).

The Law defined first-century piety, and the first vignette mentions Mary and Joseph's compliance with the Law six times: (1) they circumcise Jesus on the eighth day (2:21); (2) Mary fulfilled the requisite days of purification (2:22); (3) they dedicated Jesus as the Law required (2:22-23); (4) they offered the sacrifice stipulated in the Law (2:24); (5) they did what the Law required (2:27); (6) after fulfilling all the Law's requirements, they returned home (2:39). Jesus was raised by devout, Scripture-obeying parents.

Both Simeon and Anna are models of devotion. Simeon is a Spirit-inspired prophet: the Spirit comes on him (2:25), speaks to him (2:26), and leads him to the temple at just the right time to meet Jesus (2:27). Anna is devout: she is a prophet, aged, a life-long widow, so devoted to God that she never leaves the temple but worships day and night, praying and fasting.

Jesus too is a model of piety. He amazes the temple rabbis – theologians – with his understanding of Bible and theology. Even after that, he continues to grow in wisdom, and in the grace of God (2:40,52).

Luke takes pains to portray Jesus' origins as imbedded in the sincere,

consistent practice of piety: public worship, ritual observance, obedience to Scripture, Spirit-inspired prophecy, deep understanding of the Bible, prayer, fasting, and steady growth in grace. He carefully establishes Jesus' pedigree in anticipation of insinuations and accusations to follow.

Of course, we take Jesus' pedigree for granted. Still, for us these features model the sort of personal piety – and the sort of family piety – that God commends: corporate worship, obedience to Scripture, sensitivity to the Spirit's leading, prayer, fasting, deep Bible-study, and steady growth in understanding and grace. Take stock of your current devotional practices. Spiritual growth happens step-by-step in the process of a daily relationship with God. How is your walk with God? And pray for those parents who dedicated their children this past Sunday, that they would effectively model a life of piety for their children.

Day 2: Luke 2:21-52 The Simplicity of Jesus' Origins

In a world marked by powerful emperors and local kings, and in a religion marked by high priest, ornate temple, and elaborate ceremony, Jesus' story is remarkable not for its status, but for its ordinariness, even simplicity: peasant parents who cannot afford the default offering of a lamb (2:24); a wizened old prophet awaiting death (2:26-29); a ancient widow (2:36-38); a baby of dubious parentage (2:21), and then a boy, 'smart as a whip', but still a lad, after all (2:45-48).

Nothing here to impress either emperor or high priest. Little to draw the attention of crowds or paparazzi. But that's Luke point. Throughout his gospel he devotes special attention to 'the little people': to women, the poor, the afflicted, the disenfranchised, the disreputable. Or, rather, he draws attention to God's favor on the little people. Which is a reminder to us: God cares little about the marks of prestige that count in our world, whether degree, or job, or title, or income, or contacts. What he cares about is people of little account but of simple piety. That's a noble ambition to strive for in our own lives, and a guide to how we might honor God through faithful devotion and quiet service.

Day 3: Luke 2:21-40 The End of Suffering and Alienation from God

Both Simeon and Anna anticipate Jesus' ministry in tones reminiscent of the book of Isaiah. To a people about to go into the suffering of forced exile, under divine judgment for their iniquity, Isaiah promised a time when their sins would be all paid for (Isa 40:1-2), when God would come to

comfort and to save (Isa 49:13; 51:3; 52:9; 57:18; 61:2,10; 66:13), when salvation would come not only to Israel, but through Israel, to all the nations (Isa 40:5; 42:6; 46:13; 49:6; 52:10). Setting eyes on Jesus, both Simeon and Anna announced that time had arrived: salvation, for all people, a light for the gentiles, glory for Israel (Luke 2:29-32), and the liberation of Jerusalem from both the judgment of God and the occupying forces of her conqueror (2:38). To see just a spark of this, to know that it would be coming in the imminent future, was enough to bring Simeon's life to its fulfillment, so that he could die in peace (2:29-30).

Simeon and Anna are reminders to us of all that we have, the reality of which they saw only a foreshadowing. As odd as it would seem to them, it is incredibly easy for us to grow accustomed to this, to take it for granted, so that our lives are characterized less by appreciation for the deep privilege of divine grace, than by disappointment over whatever we still lack, whether in material goods, or emotional satisfactions, or personal achievements. We fix our eyes on the next thing to acquire or attain, and devote ourselves to that pursuit, rather than to reveling in Christ and what we have in him.

Day 4: Luke 2:34-35 Suffering and Alienation Revisited

While promising the end of suffering for Israel's past sin, Simeon hastens to add two caveats, referencing new forms of suffering. For one, not everyone will accept the offer of reconciliation with God through Jesus. Instead, just as he becomes the cause of salvation for those who accept him, conversely he becomes that cause of condemnation for those who reject him: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel" (2:34). Harder still, the innocent Mary will suffer unbearable anguish for the salvation of the world: "A sword will pierce your own soul too" (2:35).

This serves as a reminder to us that the good news of salvation also contains an underlying note – two notes, actually – of bad news. While the gospel is good news for those who throw themselves on the mercy of God, it is bad news of condemnation for those who reject him. This is not to encourage fatalism, but to underscore the eternal significance of our sharing Christ and the urgency of our prayers for those who do not yet know him. Additionally, the gospel is a reminder of what our salvation cost Jesus' parents, both human and divine, not to mention what it cost Jesus himself. And so we worship the God who suffered for us, and pray for the

lost that they might not suffer for themselves.

Day 5: Luke 2:41-52 The Oddity – or the Mystery – of Incarnation

The notion of incarnation would have crossed no one's mind at the time, but its oddity is certainly in Luke's mind as he reflects in hindsight. It comes out twice in the account of Jesus in the temple. First, having lost Jesus for five days, Mary scolds him when she and Joseph finally find him in the temple, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your *father* and I have been anxiously searching for you.' 'No,' implies Jesus, 'I have been with my *Father* this entire time' (2:48-49). Luke notes that Joseph and Mary did not understand what he meant; nonetheless, he went back to Nazareth with them, and was obedient to parents who failed to understand him, and knew less about God than he did.

So we are prompted to marvel afresh at the odd notion that the Son of God can become a son of man. And, perhaps it is not amiss to note in passing – though this was certainly not Luke's main point – that teenagers who still feel misunderstood and underappreciated by their parents find themselves in good company, though the price of that self-satisfaction is the obligation to follow Jesus here too, in the path of submission and obedience.

Day 6: Luke 1:5-2:52 To whom does the Christ-child Come?

As we come to the close of the birth narratives, we take a step back in overview.

To whom does the Christ-child come?

To a barren old couple. To a young girl, inexplicably, embarrassingly pregnant. To a hard-working but poor groom-to-be. To a baby in the womb. To shepherds out in the field late at night. To new parents, dedicating their first child. To a wizened, old prophet, longing to see the Messiah, so that he can die in peace. To a grieving widow, assuaging her pain and loneliness through constant devotion to God. To Jews. To gentiles. To all people.

And this is the gospel still: that Christ comes to all who seek God. To you. To me. To those whom we love. To those among whom we live. To those with whom we work. To nobody important, but to anyone who seeks. Pray for someone in your life who does not know God, that they would seek him, and that seeking, they would find.