

Sermon “Bucket List”
Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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Luke 2: 21-40

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.’

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Sermon “ Bucket List”

So what’s on your bucket list? Do you have one? Is there somewhere you want to visit, something you want to do or to see? Maybe you don’t call it a bucket list, but maybe you have things you want to experience or accomplish before you die. Anyone want to share?

If someone asks me about my bucket list, I usually say that I don’t have one. But there is this aquarium in Monterey CA that I saw on some television program a long time ago that I think would be cool to visit. Or maybe I’d like to visit Puerto Rico where lots of my patients who blessed me with their hospitality while I was in their homes came from. Mostly, I want to see my grandkids to grow up and do things with them.

And there are some things that I can say I have already checked off my list, like becoming ordained and being able to invite all people to come to Communion. That to me is an amazing blessing. As I teenager I used to watch the priest during Communion. I longed to consecrate bread and wine, to be able to preside over that sacrament. But since I was never going to become a priest, I dismissed it and went on with my life. But now.... Well, I am a minister and can invite all people to Christ’s table.

And, I have more blessings than I can count, so I don’t feel like I need a bucket list or perhaps you could say that my bucket is pretty full.

Well, Simeon had a bucket list with one thing on it. Simeon wanted to see the Messiah before he died. He was a devout man and the Holy Spirit had assured him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah.

Well, when Simeon was in the Jerusalem temple and saw Mary and Joseph come in with the infant Jesus, he knew that this boy was the Messiah. On an ordinary day at the temple, there would have been throngs of people coming and going. Among them, a couple with an infant appeared. This couple was too poor to afford the usual sacrifice of a lamb so they had to resort to the substitute sacrifice of 2 pigeons or turtle doves. They had brought their infant son for the ritual required of them by their faith.

Simeon saw them and recognized this lowly infant as more than a baby of poor parents. Simeon saw the infant as the one who was to be the consolation of Israel. We don’t know how, but he knew. No angels proclaimed Jesus was the one. There was no star to follow. Simeon just knew.

With the enthusiasm of one who is filled with the Holy Spirit, he rushed over to this couple, took their infant from Mary’s arms, lifted him up and praised God.

He told God, now he could die in peace because he had seen the light that God promised to all people; for Gentiles and the people of Israel, and for the salvation of the world.

Simeon's bucket list had been made complete. That which this devout man desired most in life, had come to pass. He had seen and was holding the Savior, his Savior, the Savior of the World in his arms.

And Mary and Joseph, we hear, were amazed at what Simeon said as he held up their son. I imagine they were shocked at first when this old man came toward them, taking Jesus from their arms, and lifting him up to God in praise. I imagine they were startled by his actions. But to hear that their son was to be the salvation of the world... The whole thing was probably beyond belief. But then again, Mary had been visited by an angel. She had laid her newborn in a feeding trough. And they had been visited by shepherds who had seen angels. It all must have been a lot to absorb.

But Simeon also spoke other words, the words that no mother or father would want to hear. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed-and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

Simeon tells Mary and Joseph, that their son was destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel and would be opposed by many. And he said to Mary that a "sword will pierce your own soul, too." That must have been distressing to hear.

The angel, Gabriel, who had appeared to Mary to announce her pregnancy did not say anything about this. He said, "Do not be afraid... your son will be great, the Son of the Most High ...and his kingdom will have no end." These are hopeful words, not distressing words. Gabriel said nothing about a sword piercing her soul. There were no distressing words from that angel.

Then Anna appeared to Mary and Joseph in the temple. She was an old woman, a prophetess who spent day and night in the temple- fasting and praying. When she saw the infant, she knew him too and praised God. Somehow Anna knew that Jesus was the Messiah. And she shared this good news with all who were seeking the Messiah, looking for the one who was to redeem Israel. She announced the good news to all who would listen – right after Mary was told by a devout elderly man that she would experience a pain that cuts into her soul. Mary barely had time to process Simeon's words when that elderly woman, a prophet, shares the good news of Jesus with all who would listen.

Such good news and such pain – were announced surrounding the birth and life of Jesus. Such an extraordinary beginning for this family. After the initial praise and glory were a prediction of pain. But then Anna appeared, with words good news.

I cannot imagine the thoughts that ran through the minds of Mary and Joseph. Did they talk about this as they walked home to Nazareth? Luke simply tells us that Mary, Joseph and Jesus

return to Nazareth, where Jesus grows up. Luke tells us that Jesus “became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.” I believe that Mary held all that she experienced in her heart and but she and Joseph trusted in God and went about raising Jesus the best they could.

Life goes on, the ordinary happens.

Our lives are a mixture of hopes and dreams, distressing news and painful realities, a mixture of joy and sorrow as we receive good news and bad news. But our God, Emmanuel, God-with-us, is with us. Our God became human to share the joy and sorrow, to be with us. In the midst of all we experience in our normal daily living, God’s grace, mercy and blessing are with us.

So what do we do with the mix of experiences that we face?

As I some of you know, my 22 year old brother died suddenly when I was 24 years old. It was a difficult time for me. At the time, I was a visiting nurse in Bridgeport. One day, while driving down Park Road. I noticed a sign for a shrine. So I pulled into a long driveway. The place was a little dilapidated. But at the end of the driveway, there was a statue that was a replica of Michelangelo’s Pieta, that very touching and moving sculpture of Mary holding the body of Jesus after it had been taken down from the cross. It was a quiet place and somehow there were never any other people there.

I found comfort in this out of the way place, in that statue of Mary holding Jesus’ body. It was very powerful for me. I knew that Mary understood what it was like to experience the loss of a son. She knew what my mother was going through and my father too. And I even believe that she understood what I was going through as a sister who lost a brother who was a young man himself. In my mind, whatever pain had pierced Mary’s soul, as the mother of Jesus crucified, made her able to understand the loss that my family experienced. That gave me strength and comfort.

In the midst of our lives, we will have joy and sorrow, sorrow and joy. Our God, is with us, and gives us what we need - different things for different people. For me, at that time, God provided that place and that statue to support me in my grief.

Some times, our God-with-us, puts people in our lives who have lived through similar experiences to support us. Consider individuals who have struggled with addiction to alcohol or drugs, and after becoming sober, become sponsors for others who are beginning a 12 step program. People who have shared a struggle like ours, can encourage us and give us courage in the process.

Sometimes when we are struggling or down, God provides that neighbor who brings us Christmas cookies, or the friend who calls us when we least expect it, or sends us a note or an email that reminds us someone cares.

In the midst of our pain, our spirits are lifted when someone reaches out to us, supports us with a gesture, their presence, or their words. Then as we feel better, we are able to understand and to support others. Our God is able to use us.

In the prophesy of Simeon there were words of pain and struggle but they were followed amazing words of hope by Anna. Even for this the holiest of families, there would be challenges. But our God, who was born among us, is with us in extravagant love, and understands all of it. As we continue in this Christmas season, let us remember that our God is born again and is present in our lives no matter what the situation. That gives us hope.

Our God, perhaps working through the Spirit or perhaps through the Spirit working through others, will always be there for us. God will be there with us in joy as we check off items on our bucket lists. But our God will also help us to carry our buckets when they are heavy and fill our buckets when they are empty giving us hope. Our God will be there and celebrate with us when our buckets are filled with life's joys. In all circumstances, our God will be with us in love.

This time after Christmas, let us continue to reflect on the miracle of Christmas, and the birth of Jesus - demonstrating the depth of God's love. Let us continue to celebrate the miracle of Jesus' birth and God's love. Let that miracle fill our buckets and our hearts with hope, peace, joy and love. Then let us reach out to others to help them with their buckets.

Merry Christmas