

Jesus Is Here! Do We Recognize Him?

Luke 2:21-40

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Audio: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/jesus-is-here-do-we-recognize-him/>

Imagine with me... Simeon, an old man, taking Jesus, a tiny baby into, into his arms. Lifting his gaze to the heavens, praising God, completely unconcerned with who sees or hears him. His weathered hands caressing Jesus' tender newborn head. Turning, touching Joseph's shoulder, gazing into Mary's eyes - blessing them, filling their ears and their hearts with profound words about their son. Anna, eager to see Jesus' face, loudly praising God and telling the crowd about this baby come to redeem the people.

Luke makes doubly sure we catch how faithful Simeon and Anna are, adding details to show that these two have *fully* devoted their lives to God. Simeon is righteous and devout, full of the Holy Spirit and looking forward to the consolation of Israel. Anna, widowed for nearly a lifetime, never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. They have each committed themselves fully to watching and waiting for God to act.

Simeon and Anna are model disciples, long before Jesus spoke the words "come and follow me." They are obedient to God, spiritually disciplined, full of the Holy Spirit. They are so completely in tune with their calling and purpose that when a poor newlywed couple come to the 35 acre temple complex with their six week old baby boy Simeon and Anna recognize that this isn't just any baby boy. Jesus is here! And Simeon and Anna recognize him.

We are so familiar with the images and characters in the Christmas story. Even very young children can spot images of baby Jesus, shepherds, angels and identify them. If we drive two blocks from the church in either direction, this time of year, we can find more than one nativity scene in a store window or in a person's yard. Those plastic light-up yard art nativity figures have been so nicely molded and painted, and glossed over. We can so easily lose touch with the significance of the way Jesus came into the world and the significance of the faithful people who received him.

When I started seminary, I took a church history class my first semester. On the board one night, our professor drew a square and wrote the words "human" and "divine" on the edges of the square. He asked us a series of questions, got us thinking about Jesus being both human and divine. He eventually drew another shape inside the square and explained that, over the course of church history, the consensus has generally been that Jesus was both human and divine - of both substances, as we sometimes hear--, falling somewhere in the middle of the square. There are, of course, those who see Jesus as more divine than human, like the Gnostics, for example. And vice versa - more human than divine. But, generally, Christian tradition has maintained the mysterious interplay between humanity and divinity within the person of Christ.

That night, the professor pushed us to think about the significance of Jesus' humanity. He explained that a heavy focus of the early church was on proving Jesus' divinity - to prove among those who had known or known of Jesus, the man - that he was also of divine substance. That's why Matthew's Gospel, for example, goes to such great effort to explain and justify how and why Jesus is truly the Son of God or the Son of Man. So, my professor said, if the great challenge for the early church was to establish Jesus' divinity, then the great challenge of our age is to establish within ourselves an understanding of Jesus as human.

This idea really challenges the way we approach this time of year. It's easy for us to sort of gloss over the first couple of chapters in Luke's Gospel without really stopping to think about the dynamics of what's going on.

Jesus was a baby. A helpless, needy, vulnerable newborn. And he was not born in the newly remodeled wing of a state of the art birth center - with hardwood finished floors and 20x20 rooms with plush furniture and an en suite four piece bathroom. Jesus was born into an insignificant family of meager means at a time when life was fraught with uncertainty and brutality.

When we look at Jesus and his family through this lens, when we take seriously our Christian tradition that Jesus was of human substance, we just have to stop and scratch our heads for a minute. A baby of such humble origins became an influential teacher, prophet, and healer and is living through us even today.

And what's unique about Luke's Gospel is how Jesus is able to grow into a man who touches and changes the lives of God's people well beyond his earthly ministry - *who* makes it possible for Jesus to fulfill his calling.

Luke makes very clear that, though Jesus comes from an insignificant, even poor, family they are a faithful family. Mary and Joseph are obedient to God's Spirit and to Mosaic law. When Mary hears the news that she's unexpectedly pregnant, she responds with a song of praise. The couple who struggled to make it to Bethlehem for the census bears the physical and financial toll of traveling yet again to Jerusalem, with a newborn, to fulfill Mosaic laws of purification and dedication. Mary and Joseph, though poor, are, according to Luke's Gospel the foundation upon which Jesus' faith and ministry will be built.

Luke's Gospel gives special importance to the people who recognized the significance of Jesus around the time of his birth - before anyone else saw anything significant. These people were Mary and Joseph. Anna and Simeon. Jesus, according to Luke's Gospel, becomes the Savior of the world through the spiritual obedience of those aware enough to recognize him.

Yesterday, I was in Lowes looking through after Christmas deals. I had a very brief conversation with a store employee.

“It’s hard to believe it’s over,” he said, talking about Christmas. “It just sorta came and went. Kinda anti-climactic, you know?”

I found his words to be sad but true to the way our culture at large relates to Christmas. Another round of parties and presents, food and frenzy - and to what end? I think, this time of year in particular, meaninglessness and purpose-less-ness press in around people. The holidays truly come and go without consequence. In the shadows of our 21st century, prosperous and productive culture are pervasive emptiness and poverty of spirit.

I recently came across a book by Dr. James Martin out of Oxford University. Before he died in 2013, Martin devoted his professional life to the field of technology and its impact on the future. He published a book in 2007 called *The Meaning of the 21st Century: A Vital Blueprint for Ensuring Our Future*. He outlines what he sees as the great challenges of the 21st century. His list includes things we’re hearing a lot about these days: saving the planet, confronting poverty, and dealing with terrorism. Included on his list is a need to “bridge the skills and wisdom gap.” Here’s what he has to say about that:

“A serious problem right now is the gap between our skill and our wisdom. Science and technology are accelerating furiously, but wisdom is not. Today, deep reflection about our future circumstances is eclipsed by the rush to build faster, cheaper, smarter, more-efficient gadgets that will increase corporate profits. The skill-wisdom gap is enlarged because skills offer the ways to get wealthy. Society’s best brains are saturated with immediate issues that become ever more complex, rather than reflecting on why we are doing this and what the long-term consequences will be.”

Luke’s Gospel offers the example of Simeon and Anna - model disciples, obedient to God, spiritually disciplined, full of the Holy Spirit. So completely in tune with what God is up to that when Jesus shows up they recognize him for who he is. Imagine the years of focused spiritual reflection on God’s purposes and God’s way they did. It is through the spiritual obedience and devotion of Mary and Joseph and Anna and Simeon that Jesus becomes the Savior of the world. God acts through others.

Today we have the opportunity to jump into discipleship with both feet. To decide that this season will not come and go without consequence. Anna and Simeon have set the tone for us, showing us how to put on our Jesus goggles and look around for where Jesus is and ask humbly how we are to join in on his work of salvation and redemption. This is a season in the church year when we proclaim that Jesus is here. A season of the year when we follow Jesus with new hope and energy.

As I have thought and prayed about where Jesus is, where the presence of Christ is calling for love in action, Matthew 25 has come to my mind again and again. In Matthew 25, Jesus digs a little deeper into the true meaning of loving God and loving people. He says that, in the end, he will say to the faithful:

“I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.

Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me - you did it to me.” (MSG Translation)

Jesus is here! May God give us the eyes to recognize him.