

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY (B)
Genesis 15: 1-6; 21:1-3 Hebrews 11: 8, 11-12, 17-19 Luke 2: 22-40
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

The child Jesus is brought by his parents to the temple to fulfill the religious law that required Jewish boys to be circumcised. This ritual marked him as a descendent of Abraham. Parents were supposed to offer a year-old lamb; poor parents could offer two pigeons or turtle doves. His parents' offering indicates Jesus was born into a poor family. Those in our poorer congregations can identify with Jesus' family's need to fulfill obligations with limited resources. These days many families, even in our more well-to-do country, have to scrape to pay for life's basics (41 million Americans are without medical insurance) and must make choices between rent, food, education or medical necessities. The preacher also turns a gaze to the more poverty-stricken countries of the world. On the feast of the Holy Family our task is not to paint a verbal holy card of some idyllic family, but to show how Jesus, from the very beginning of his life, was situated in a family and a world that had difficult conditions similar to those experienced by many modern families.

The preacher is given the option today of choosing a shorter rendering of this story (2: 22, 39-40). I always approach the shorter options given in the Lectionary in this way: if the evangelist wanted to tell a shorter story, he would have. Let's respect the intentions and storytelling skills of the evangelist. In today's selection from Luke, choosing the shorter version would leave out two important biblical figures; the elderly and righteous Simeon and the prophetess Anna. Frankly, eliminating them from the story makes the narrative quite tame and domesticated. We live in an age that worships at the altar of youth. Some men and women in this country are paying a lot of money for Botox, injecting poisons into their facial muscles to make them look younger. There are even "Botox parties" where people come together to socialize and receive their injections. In the light of our society's fear of growing older and the general way in which we shunt the elderly aside, we cannot neglect the wise, alert and elderly Simeon and Anna.

This story starts with faithful and simple Jews, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna, who are shown to have their hope and trust in God fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. The first prophetic voice to speak in this story is Simeon and he broadens the scope of the significance of Jesus. Unlike Matthew's infancy account, Luke

was writing for a non-Jewish Christian audience. They lived outside the area of Palestine--- they were outsiders. They would hear in this passage the voice of the elderly prophet Simeon who proclaims that this savior is for “all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles.” Religious, economic, cultural outsiders receive early announcement in this gospel that Jesus is for them. Luke will continue to show this in the subsequent narratives showing how the adult Jesus reached out to those outside the pail.

The tale of these two prophets is a tale of grace. Anna’s name means “grace,” an early reminder by Luke that his gospel is a story of God’s free gift of self to us through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. While both Simeon and Anna are obscure people, ignored by the powers that be; they are recognized and graced by their God. How else, but by grace, would the aged Simeon, over a long period of waiting and from the numerous children brought to the temple, have recognized God’s salvation in Christ? Simeon “sees” through a gift of the Holy Spirit, “For my eyes have seen your salvation.” God had opened his eyes to see beneath the surface, to see God at work in the ordinary parents and child before him.

It takes an eye-opening gift from God to see the deeper meaning and divine gifts being offered in the ordinary events of family life. Is Christ any less present to us at home than he is in church as we gather to worship? A Christmas decorated church may seem more conducive to “seeing” the divine than are the homes we just left in a rush to get the family to church on time—leaving dishes in the sink, sibling squabbles in the car, dinner unprepared and family issues unresolved. We bring with all this to church today, the stuff of family life. Add to this mix the larger community and world picture: pending war, financial downturn, drugs and violence in our schools, for some, the issues of single parenthood, etc.

“Time” magazine just chose its “persons of the year,” the three women “whistle blowers” who revealed coverups in the F.B.I. and two major corporations. If “Time” chose the Family of the Year, we would hardly expect our family to even be in the running for that honor. We are in church celebrating the Holy Family and most of us feel our families are not even on the distant horizon of being called “Holy.” We could pray for a late Christmas gift—Simeon’s gift of seeing. His was the gift of seeing “the Christ of the Lord” in the daily procession of life before his eyes. We too need his gift to see Christ, not only in the “holy” more together settings of our family life, but in the daily mess, fast pace and struggle to pull things together. While we will have many opportunities for healing love in our

families, we will never get it neatly together, there will always seem to be so much more to do at home.

The preacher can reassure people today that all this is ok. God visits us in surprising and unexpected ways. Listen to the elder Simeon who guides us today, with him we too await the “consolation of Israel” —the entrance of God into our lives in new ways. Our families need the “consolation” given to Simeon. We place the fragmented parts of our families before God today and in prayer ask for the Spirit’s coming to heal and restore what human nature cannot do on its own. In our family we want to “see the Christ of the Lord” do his healing work. All family life is under assault these days; modern parenting isn’t for the faint of heart. I sat in a circle with a group of parents recently. They shared how hard it is to keep their families on a sane path and to instill their values and faith in their children. They just don’t get much support and appreciation from the world around them. I would describe these parents the way Luke describes Simeon, “righteous and devout,” but it doesn’t make their tasks any easier. They look for the consolation of God in their daily family life.

Anna (“grace”) is one of six female prophets named in the New Testament. In Luke’s gospel a prophet is an important person with special and unique spiritual gifts. We have had two birth narratives at this point in Luke: John the Baptist’s and Jesus’. Anna’s appearance ends the second, Jesus’ infancy account. Luke give some attention to Anna in the story. She is a devout widow. Luke often places widows in a favorable light, showing them to be examples of faith. In Luke’s time a woman would be described solely in terms of her relationship to men, as Luke initially does--- she is “the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.” Yet, Luke tells more about Anna, independent of the men in her life. She was married seven years and has lived a widow until she was 84. Luke also describes her as a woman of vigilance and perseverance in prayer. “She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer.”

“Phanuel” also describes Anna’s life; it means “a place of struggle or adversity.” She belongs to one of the 12 tribes; she was a woman of faith who struggled with adversity. She waited attentively. Advent may be over, but it seems our waiting never ends. Waiting can sharpen our understanding of God and give us time to re-evaluate our expectations of God. It seems, our God is not the God of quick solutions or easy answers. Waiting, as Anna did, gives us a chance to let go of unreasonable expectations. Her faithfulness to prayer and fasting reminds us of

what carries us through unexpected winters of grief and summers dry of hope. How often in her life did Anna have to adjust her expectation of how God would come? Would she have recognized the Christ if he had come as the child of a poor couple earlier in her life? Earlier in her waiting, would she have judged the choice God had made and God's ways? God shows up in unexpected ways and Anna teaches us to watch and pray so that we do recognize God when God comes to us.

Simeon and Anna's stories tell of God's fidelity and fulfillment of promises. It speaks to a congregation whose members also experience a sense of insignificance in a very large and impersonal world of economics and political and military power.

RESOURCES FOR THE PREACHER

With Advent, we enter Year B of the Liturgical Cycle with its focus on Mark's gospel. Here are three books to consider as resources for preaching the Gospel of Mark:

Elizabeth Struthers Malbon, *Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 2002) ISBN 1563383799.

Bonnie Bowman Thurston, *Preaching Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) ISBN 0800634284.

Ched Meyers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of the Mark's Story of Jesus*. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988) ISBN 0883446200.

—submitted by Greg Heille OP, Central Dominican Province Promoter of Preaching

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Robbie Brewington
- Jerry Conner
- Jerry Ray Cummings

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

QUOTABLE

The Feast of the Holy Family is a relatively recent development. In the 19th. Century, the devotion to the Holy Family spread around the world. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph came to be seen as a model for the Christian family. The actual feast moved around for some years until settling into its present place between Christmas and the Octave of Christmas. Even though the origins of this feast stress the nuclear family, we think it might be more helpful to modern families and true to the biblical picture if you portrayed Jesus' family as an extended one. Families in first-century Palestine did not live isolated lives. They lived in villages and in close proximity, perhaps in the same dwellings, with parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws. This knowledge can be a great comfort to children who have relationship with an array of parents, step-parents, siblings, half-siblings, step-siblings, and cousins.

—From, CELEBRATING THE LECTIONARY: 1995, Resource Publications, Inc., page 96.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

Economic and social policies as well as organization of the work world should be continually evaluated in light of their impact on the strength and stability of family life. The long-range future of this nation is intimately linked with the well-being of families, for the family is the most basic form of human community. Efficiency and competition in the marketplace must be moderated by greater concern for the way work schedules and compensation support or threaten the bonds between spouses and between parents and children.

---ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR ALL, #93 (U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops)

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

Jude Siciliano, OP

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