

“But Here”  
Luke 2:22-40/Isaiah 52:7-10  
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By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

A fight broke out in Bethlehem this past week. Specifically, the Church of the Nativity, the traditional birthplace of Christ, was the scene of the clash between Armenian and Greek Orthodox monks. Following the December 25<sup>th</sup> celebration of Christ’s birth by the Roman Catholics there, the Armenian and Greek Orthodox clergy were cleaning the church to prepare for their celebrations of Christmas on January 7<sup>th</sup>. The battle broke out on a border in the church between the two denominations, each accusing the other of encroaching on their sacred space. Police arrived to break up the fight, as the monks battled each other with brooms. No serious injuries were reported.

The ancient church, which traces its beginnings to the 4<sup>th</sup> C, is shared by three Christian denominations; Roman Catholic, Armenian and Greek Orthodox. The peace between the three denominations has always been “iffy.” The accepted practice there is that if you clean or a repair a part of the church, you own it. Therefore to let another denomination help you clean up is to give that part of the church to them. Similar fights during cleanup have broken out in the past. (The Herald, December 29, 2011, p. A-6)

When I first read about “the battle of the brooms in Bethlehem” I thought it was one of those sad ironies in life; the birthplace of the Prince of Peace, who brings the kingdom of God’s peace, is the location of ongoing battles between rival clergy over who owns what. Somehow the message of God’s salvation in Christ is missed. Somehow the message of Christmas peace cannot even be lived out by Christian clergy in Bethlehem during Christmastide.

But as I thought about it some more, I was reminded how hard it is for all of us to live into the hopeful and strange message of Christmas in the days that follow. The power and truth of nativity pageants, candles, communion, and “Silent Night, Holy Night” gets lost and packed away in the decisions, living and battles of the New Year. Christmas Eve candles seem a long way from sweeping the floor on Wednesday. And it happens even in a place like Bethlehem during Christmastide. It is a type of pointed metaphor that invites some reflection.

II. Text

Read Luke 2:22-40 (Narrator vv. 22-24, Man/Simeon vv. 25-35, Woman/Anna vv.36-38, Narrator vv. 39-40)

### III. Brief Exegesis

After the appearance of angels, the trip to Bethlehem, the angelic choir singing “Glory to God in the highest heaven,” and the visit of shepherds to the baby, the story takes a very normal, earthly turn. After the birth of a child, and a period of purification (33 days for the birth of a boy, and 66 days for the birth of a girl-Leviticus 12:1-8), faithful Jewish mothers came to the temple to make a sacrifice and complete the purification rite. A year old lamb and pigeon were to be brought and sacrificed. And if a lamb was outside the budget, two pigeons could be brought. So faithful, and of modest means, Mary and Joseph come to Jerusalem and the temple with two pigeons so to complete the purification rite. It is a normal, faithful, everyday act.

As Luke tells the story he also mentions the “redemption of the first born” (Exodus 13:11-16; Numbers 18:15-16). In the pious Jewish faith tradition the first born of animals and human beings belonged to God.....they were committed to serve God. The first born of human beings was redeemed by paying 5 shekels at the temple. This gift of 5 shekels freed the person to live a life outside of pure religious service. This is the tradition to which Luke refers. Again, the point is that Jesus will be raised in a faithful Jewish family, firmly rooted in the traditions of Jewish faith. And interestingly, Luke never mentions the payment of 5 shekels. Perhaps it is to quietly suggest that from the very beginning Jesus remained dedicated to God.....committed to God’s service in all of life. But again, the trip to the temple to “redeem the first born” is a normal, everyday, faithful act for Jews in that day. Jesus will be raised in a modest, faithful Jewish home.

Within this story of purification and redemption there is the moving story of the two aged saints at the temple. The first is the old man Simeon. Nearing death, he holds the baby Jesus, and in him sees the salvation of God for Israel and the world. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Simeon draws upon many salvation oracles from Isaiah (similar to our Call to Worship today, and the first scripture reading from Isaiah 52:7-10). Simeon’s words of salvation stand within the great prophetic tradition of Israel. And his prophetic declaration at this time and place is that the long awaited hope of God’s salvation for Israel and the world will come to pass in this baby he holds. God’s salvation in Jesus does not “come out of left field.” Rather, we are to understand that Jesus is part of God’s plan of salvation through Israel for the world.

But as Simeon shares this great hope, he also says it will come with cost. Jesus will bring the truth and light of God’s salvation, but it will come with a crisis of decision. The truth of God in Jesus will cause the rising and falling, life and death, movement to and away from God. Throughout history people have exercised freedom to choose for or against God, and so they will with Jesus. God’s salvation comes with a cost.

The truth of Simeon's prophetic witness is confirmed by another aged saint in the temple, Anna. Amidst all the grandeur and busyness of the temple, she has spent years there in quiet prayer, fasting and worship. She too bears witness to God's salvation in the baby who was in the temple that day.

On the one hand, Simeon and Anna appear to be two ordinary, elderly, faithful Jews, overlooked by many. But Simeon and Anna also represent Israel at its best; quiet saints, who are devout, obedient, at home in the temple, pious, and honestly longing for God's salvation. They see what those busy in the temple miss. They are a portrait of the Israel that will accept Jesus. They stand within the faith tradition. They represent the best memory and hope of God's people. They are everyday people who are open and waiting for the salvation of God.

The trip to the temple then draws to a close. Joseph and Mary have been faithful to their tradition. They have been obedient to the law of Moses. It is now time to go home. It is now time to go back to work, to bills and taxes, to friendships and family, to dirty clothes and meals to prepare, to talk of politics, neighbors and God. It is now time to go back to Nazareth. And so they do. With a newborn baby, and all the words, promises and experiences of Christmas.....they go home to wonder and wait and watch. Perhaps it is a little like planting a tulip bulb in the fall, and waiting for spring. They go back home to life.....and wonder how much will change.

#### IV. Reflections

A fight broke out in Bethlehem. Somehow the sacred failed to infuse the ordinary of cleanup.....somehow the promise of peace did not overcome simmering distrust....somehow salvation did not change lives. It is the challenge for each of us as we go home after Christmas. We have all the words, promises and experiences of Christmas....but has much changed?

It is the season of Christmas now. And so before we rush on to the New Year with its resolutions, it is good to be reminded of Christmas. Before we pack it away, it is good to reflect on where we have been. The hay bales from the Christmas Eve nativity pageant are still here.....and the well-used Advent Wreath candles.....and a few of the red poinsettias. Our Christmas trees and wreaths are still out, and the Christmas banners still flutter in the warm air from the boiler. And I'm glad we will celebrate the Boar's Head and Yule Log Festival next Sunday. It is all like the Christmas card that arrives late.....or finding a Christmas decoration during spring cleaning....or discovering the forgotten Christmas cookies in the freezer.....or using a Christmas gift card in a few months to buy some spring shorts.....all reminders of Christmas after life has returned to "back to real life." Christmas is about the salvation of God working its

way out in our real lives, in our real world....when we go back home...when we sweep and clean up....when we go back to work (and even church) and see those people we really struggle to like.

We have not put our Christmas decorations away yet in our home. We may linger a little. We may “dilly-dally.” I think I may leave my Charlie Brown Christmas tree out on my desk a little longer. All to remind me that that the hope of Christmas is lived out when:

Folks at our New Year’s Day dinner today are served with a smile;  
Past hurts and hard words are forgiven;  
Patience is practiced in the grocery store line;  
Hospitality is extended to the person who sits alone at a church dinner;  
Deadlines are set aside for a person in need.

Nazareth, Bethlehem, the Shenango Valley.....Christmas is not a place but a person.....not the past, but now.....not there, but here.