

First Presbyterian Church  
Greenfield, Indiana  
Pastor John J. Paulson  
December 28, 2008      First Sunday after Christmas

**Praise and Rejoice!**

Psalm 148	Praise the Lord!
Isaiah 61: 10 – 62: 3	Rejoice in the Lord!
Luke 2: 22 – 40	Jesus is recognized by the faithful
Galatians 4: 4 – 7	We are heirs of God's promises!

***Informally Before the Sermon. This may well be the most interesting Sunday in the year. Christmas was last Thursday, but the celebrating is continuing for many who have guests in town or have traveled to see relatives. It is almost 2009, but not quite. We can't celebrate New Year's 'Eve yet, but we can get ready. The kids are off from school on vacation, and many of their parents are taking a day or two off during the holidays as well. Our shopping is done, except for after-Christmas bargains and exchanging those things that were either too big or too small. Then there is this Sunday in the middle of it all. Right here in the midst between Christmas and New Years, we have this Sunday to praise and worship; it's almost like an oasis in the middle of the desert - a day of peace and quiet in the midst of the holiday hullabaloo!***

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditations in our hearts be pleasing to you, Oh Lord, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

Although it may be peaceful and quiet for us, for at least two of the people in our scripture lessons this morning, this day is anything but peaceful and quiet. It not only is the most interesting day of the year for them, it is the most interesting day of their lives!

These two faithful people were well known in the Temple.

Anna practically lived there; spending day and night fasting, praying and worshipping God. One of the most faithful women in Jerusalem, this eighty-four year old widow knew her scriptures, and she was expecting! Well she was not expecting exactly in the sense that mean when we say someone is expecting; although she was not necessarily expecting a baby, she was expecting to meet a very special person who she knew would be coming to the Temple some day.

Simeon, unlike Anna who spent most of her time in Temple worship, would only come to the Temple from time to time to pray and worship; he was no stranger to the priests and other worshippers. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Simeon had been promised that he would not die before he saw the Messiah; the Son of God; the Christ. So, he too was expecting to meet a very special person.

On this particular day both of them were in the Temple. Anna, of course, because she spent most all of her time there; Simeon because he had just felt called to be there. Why? How? We don't know. Don't you sometimes feel called to do something, and you can't figure out why? Well, that was how Simeon felt that day.

Two people who were about to have a once-in-a-lifetime experience were in the temple that afternoon. Of course there were more than just those two, but those were the two that we hear about in Luke's gospel. Ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. I'm sure that we wouldn't even know about Simeon or Anna except for what happened in the Temple that afternoon.

According to Hebrew law there are two requirements for the parents of a first-born son, requirements that Mary and Joseph wanted to fulfill:

- first, "...a woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl is required to bring a sacrifice to the priests as an offering after she has given birth."
- secondly, "every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"

So, as good followers of God, Mary and Joseph come to the temple to present Jesus for consecration and to make the appropriate sacrifice of two doves or two young pigeons; through this sacrifice, the priest makes atonement for her, and she will be clean.' " <sup>1</sup>

On the day we are talking about, about a month after Jesus had been born, they came to the temple.

As far as we know, this was an ordinary day in the temple. People bringing sin offerings and drink offerings; bringing lambs and other animals to sacrifice. Many babies being brought to the priests for consecration or circumcision and a formal naming ceremony. The temple was a noisy, bustling place with many vendors exchanging one form of money for another; animals being sold for sacrifice. It must have been difficult even to hold a conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 12: 7 – 8 (my paraphrase)

Then Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus come in!

You know from our earlier reading what happened. Simeon recognizes Jesus as someone special when he first sees him enter the temple. He knows that this baby is the one he had been told about, and he praises God for letting him see the savior. After he prays to God, he tells Mary and Joseph what he knows about their son. "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."<sup>2</sup> How Mary must be wondering as she is hearing this. Her mind must be reeling as she recalls the visits of the angels and the shepherds, all with messages about her son and his relationship with God. Mary is a young woman, maybe sixteen or so, and not very worldly. We don't even know if she has shared all that has happened to her with anyone other than her cousin Elizabeth. Her mind must be going a mile a minute full of thoughts

As we said, Anna was also in the Temple that day, as she usually was. Although no one else apparently noticed anything special, her prayers are suddenly interrupted as her eyes are drawn to the couple with the baby walking through the temple. What is she thinking? How does she know? Of all days, this is the day! Of all the babies who have been brought to the temple, this is the one! This is the one she has been expecting. I can imagine the scene as she runs up to Mary and Joseph, all the while giving thanks to God for this child! Praising God and telling everybody within earshot about who he is and what he will do for God's people and the world! Her exclamations of joy and praise to God are filling the temple.

And, what about Mary and Joseph? From all that has happened, Mary and Joseph obviously know that there is something very special about their new Son. He is not just any baby making his first visit to the temple. I wonder if they expected something like this to happen?

Of course if this had happened in 2008, it would have been a bit different. If this been in 2008, Mary would have had a FACEBOOK page; she would have told her story to PEOPLE magazine, TIME would have featured her on the cover as the "Woman of the Year", OPRAH would have interviewed her, and, almost certainly she would have met Barbara and Whoopi and Joy and Elisabeth and Sherri on THE

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 2: 34 – 35 (NIV)

VIEW. There would have been paparazzi following her wherever she went. When she went into the hospital in labor, NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN and all the others would have had cameras and anchors on the street outside waiting. Waiting for the birth of Mary's baby. And, Mary and Joseph were traveling far from home when the baby decided to come.

Then, the baby is born. For Mary and Joseph, the birth must have been exciting and unnerving at the same time. Mary's mother is nowhere to be seen. No relatives are there to help her through her labor. No midwife is there to make the birth go well. Except for the animals, Mary and Joseph are alone in the stable. Don't you wonder if Joseph knew what to do? Did they have any websites that told them about financial planning for the baby's education? Of course, they didn't have the HUGGIES website to tell them what to have in their home for the new baby. Luckily they had none of the problems most new parents have deciding on a name. Sam, Joe, John, Timothy, Thomas, Fred – no problem. The angel told them their baby's name would be Jesus.

If it happened today, they would have been surrounded by photographers attempting to snap pictures from every angle. The first pictures of Mary's baby would have been worth more than pictures of all the babies born in 2008 to Nicole Richie, Christina Aguilera, Jennifer Lopez, Jeri Ryan, Halle Berry, Cate Blanchett, Tori Spelling and Jamie Lynn Spears put together.

While preparing for the birth, Mary would have had baby shower after baby shower; her baby would have received booties and blankets and bassinets and bottles. Joseph would have been showered with offers for life insurance and health insurance. Colleges would be contacting her to make reservations for the class of eighteen. Colgate, Princeton, IU, Purdue, Stanford, and Hanover, as well as many others would be clamoring for them to make an advance enrollment decision.

When the baby was born, Joseph would have had the video camera in the delivery room. The edited videos would have been posted on FACEBOOK; the unedited ones might have been on a personal WEBSITE; announcements would have been placed in the newspapers and mailed out to friends and relatives. Pictures would have been posted on the INTERNET and e-mailed to proud grandparents.

Through the miracle of electronics, people all over the world could know of the birth within minutes.

But, Jesus was not born in 2008. It was over two thousand years earlier. There are no newspapers. There is no INTERNET. There is no FACEBOOK. There is only word of mouth.

So, who knew of the birth? The angels? The shepherds? Elizabeth? Joseph, of course. Who else? Certainly there was no way that Simeon or Anna could have known that Mary had had a baby, let alone that she would be bringing him to the temple that day.

No, this is just a special day chosen by God. Simeon and Anna are there on that day by the grace of God.

And, that's the way God works. There is something we call "grace" that comes from God that we can not explain. We cannot plan for it; we can not measure it; we can not compare it to anything else; we can not figure it out; we can not earn it by doing anything. All we can do is accept it.

God gives it. That's all there is to it.

Grace entered the temple that day. Simeon and Anna accepted it.

Grace enters our life every day. It is ours to accept.

AMEN