

Stretching Toward Sunday

Thoughts, readings and reflections
based on this week's lectionary readings

December 27, 2020

First Sunday after Christmas, Year B

The readings this week:

- Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3
- Psalm 148
- Galatians 4:4-7
- Luke 2:22-40



[Click here to read this week's Scriptures](#)

The Presentation in the Temple: A Short Sacred Opera for Four Voices

In legend, Luke the Gospel writer is not only a physician but an artist. To me, he is also a musician because of the perfect balance of the four complementing and contrasting emotional voices in this story.

If I were staging the Presentation as a short sacred opera, I would show the couple in a busy outer courtyard buying the two doves before entering the temple, maybe someplace in the concert hall itself. The market-like courtyard fades as Mary and Joseph ascend the steps to the stage. They enter the dark, echoing temple of beautifully proportioned pillars and arches, a template so many Renaissance artists rendered for the Presentation. Mary and Joseph enter alone into this vast space, with the infant and a flimsy temporary cage for the turtledoves.

From an unseen place in the darkness you hear Simeon (baritone), singing of his longing for the consolation of Israel. Simeon, old, weary, reminds God of the promise that he "should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." A low light gradually illumines him as he sings of the exertion it took to come to the temple that day - the uneven, cobbled streets, the confusion of the marketplace, the impossible stairs, his failing faculties. And now, he waits in utter darkness, like the Gentiles, in the holy but silent space, ready to die but not yet fulfilled.

Then, from the opposite space in low-lit darkness, we hear Anna (contralto) sing her story of long widowhood and a life of ecstatic love for God, fasting and praying night and day in the temple. After her story, Simeon's voice blends with hers as they both summarize the states of their soul in this prescient moment.

Inspired by the Spirit, Simeon comes out of the darkness to watch the younger couple. Joseph, (tenor) wary, protective, shows Mary that the staff he carries suddenly blossoms again* at the threshold of the holy place. We were brought together for this child, but what does it mean? asks Joseph. Mary (soprano) remarks upon the blossoming staff, the sweet scent of the white flowers like apple blossoms in spring. And she remembers the day they were brought together in the Temple, and the tender times of learning to accept one another. Their voices also blend into a duet as they acknowledge the mystery of their lives together.

Simeon approaches, tears streaming down his withered face. "May I hold him?" asks the ancient man. After a pause, both Mary and Joseph assent and Simeon takes the child in his arms and sings another aria: Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.

Anna comes out of the shadows to join them. The four voices merge in praising God - lines from the psalms, or prophets blend to create the text here. Maybe they sing from Isaiah 60:1-7, "Arise, shine, for your light has come ..." You can imagine this yourself. What texts would you chose for the four of them to sing from the depth of human experience to Divine Love?



Now Simeon, overcome by the Spirit, prophecies: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against, ... that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." And he sings to Mary, "And a sword will pierce through your own soul also... that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

Anna joins the prophecy "... that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." Joseph joins, and Mary, standing apart from the others, her voice the steady, pulsing, foundational note that pulls all the voices together as she ponders all of this in her heart....

Someone should write this short libretto and sacred music and stage it. Meanwhile, I see it in my imagination and phrases from the unwritten music haunt me and bring me into this iconic Biblical scene. So much of scripture is sheer music.

~ Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

* According to a later legend about Mary and Joseph (the Protoevangelion of James) Mary had been raised in the Temple and when she had come of age, the authorities, wanting to give Mary to a man of God, vetted righteous men. Joseph, not wanted to marry at all, came out of obedience, but as he entered the gathering his rod miraculously blossomed like Aaron's and he was chosen to be the husband of Mary.

Reflecting on the Word



Presentation in the Temple, Fra Angelico, 1433-34, detail

1st Reading: [Isaiah 61:10 - 62:3](#)

Why is our relationship to each other in Christ far more important than what country we belong to, or our ethnic group, or any other thing that distinguishes us from others? Why does God's righteousness appeal to people of all cultures? What types of human behavior does the Lord love? What types does He hate? What was the basis for God blessing His people? What would result from the enduring "covenant" God made with His people? What is the nature of the response to God's blessings? What sort of future and change of status awaited God's chosen people? When we recognize that any goodness in us is because Jesus has clothed us with His righteousness, how does that truth give purpose and meaning to our lives?

[First Presbyterian Church of Weaverville](#)

Psalm Reading: [Psalm 148](#)

How does this psalm constitute a crescendo of praise? What sort of method is used to bring us all to praise? What is the highest creation of God? How does this psalm present age-integrated, cross-generational worship? What does God do for His people in the last verse? How do we express exaltation? What are the truths that encourage a spirit of exaltation in our praise? What other created things would you call to the worship of God? Can you think of some amazing elements of the creation of God that you have learned about recently? [Generations](#)

Let us too stand in the Temple and hold God's Son and embrace him; and that we may deserve leave to withdraw and start on our way towards a better land, let us pray to God, the all-powerful, and to the little Jesus himself, whom we so much want to speak to and hold in our arms. His are glory and power now and always. Amen. Origen 184/5-253/4

As he cradles Jesus in his arms the Eternal Now breaks forth into Simeon's consciousness (meditation one). In his ecstasy Simeon prophesies to Mary that a sword "will pierce your own soul," something she senses herself as described in Yeats's poem (meditation two). The journey of consciousness comes at a cost not only for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, but each of us who take our light from Light to become a burning and a shining lamp for others (meditation three), so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.

I hope you are enjoying these luminous and deep days of the continuing Christmas of your heart.

~ Suzanne Guthrie, [At the Edge of Enclosure](#)

3rd Reading: [Galatians 4:4-7](#)

What does it mean to be a "child of God?" Paul is speaking of our relationship with God – what would that relationship look like if we viewed God only as a Judge, watching to make sure we keep the rules? Instead of a Judge, Paul says God has changed that relationship – now we can relate to God as a Father. What difference would this make? How does Paul define a "child of God?" What does the analogy being "clothed in Christ" mean? When Jesus came – the Son of God – what did it signify for us? What were we before, and what are we now? How do we, in a sense, "trade places" with Jesus? In what sense are we an "heir" and what do you think we are heirs of? This isn't just about receiving an "inheritance check" - what else is involved? In this sense how are we "trading places" with Jesus? We are still in the season celebrating Jesus' birth – how do the circumstances around Jesus' birth foreshadow this change in our relationship to God? [Faith Element](#)

4th Reading: [Luke 2:22-40](#)

Where do you see the faithfulness of the people displayed in this passage? How do Mary and Joseph, Simeon, and Anna display faithfulness to following God? When have you experienced a time of silence from God? What should you do in response to this time of silence? Where are you awaiting the promises of God to be fulfilled? How is your pursuit of God going in the day to day? What is going well? What could be improved? How do you want to challenge yourself to pursue God in the day to day? [The Gospel Outpost](#)

Praying Toward Sunday

Rest on Me
Holy Spirit,
as you rested on Simeon and Anna,
so rest on me
Keep me expectant and open to your appearing
Fill my speech with stories of your praise and glory
Holy Spirit,
You reveal salvation to every person
reveal it again to me
Shine your light on every motivation,
on every hidden thing
Pierce my soul
so nothing I say or do opposes you
Holy Spirit,
as you guided so many that first Nativity,
so guide me
Continue to point me forward
eyes open, steady and true
Lead me to a faithful end,
so I may rest in peace forever with you
with others
and with my true self
I trust and pray in the name of the Promised One
Jesus Christ
my Savior and Savior of the World
Amen

~ Lisa Ann Moss Degrenia, [revlisad.com](#)