

Jesus' Presentation:
God's Choice for Messiah
We think we have God's identity pegged,
but God continually surprises us.

January 8, 2008

BIBLE VERSES

OT Lesson: Isaiah 49:1; 3; 5-6 (NRSV)

¹ Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. --- ³ And he said to me, "You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified." --- ⁵ And now the LORD says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honored in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength - ⁶ he says, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

NT Lesson: Luke 2:21-40 (NRSV)

²¹ After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²² When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

God's Choice for Messiah: God's self

Once again, God expands the expectations of the people surrounding Jesus. This time Luke tells us the story. Joseph and Mary, devout Jews observing the proper traditions, traveled to Jerusalem to present their infant Jesus to God at the Temple, only to be told that they were holding not only the salvation of Israel, but also of the Gentiles: God's Savior of the World, the fulfillment of the prophets.

In Isaiah, we even read that God expanded the prophet's vision in mid-sentence. God's Servant first understands he will be the consolation, the salvation of Israel; but then God reconsiders: "It is too light a thing" you should only be for Israel – I've now made you Savior of the World. God takes Globalization into cosmic dimensions.

The Servant Songs in Isaiah's were written to be both singular and corporate, about a person and about a nation. God was telling Israel, therefore, their covenant with God was not only to save themselves, but they were to understand they existed for all people – to be the Light of the World, the Salt of the Earth, the Beacon on the Hill. Israel was to trust only in God and be the model for others to emulate, causing everyone to turn from their false self-gods and come to know the one, true God.

But we know humans, and turning from ourselves was and is impossible for mere mortals. So, God finished God's own job. God came as Christ so we could have a model to emulate, the perfect Servant of God who died because we cannot be perfect.

Thank God for God!

This is the first story of Jesus at the Temple in Luke's Gospel, and each time the Temple encounters Jesus people end up confounded, astounded, and sometimes downright confused. Here Luke tells us of Jesus' presentation at the Temple. In the verses that follow, Luke relates that at age 12, after his parents celebrated Passover in Jerusalem, Jesus ditches his folks and hangs out at the Temple. Three days later Joseph and Mary finally find him. They also find the rabbis – the university profs of the day – confounded and astounded by Jesus teaching them their own scriptures. Jesus is equally confounded by his parent's fear and anger that he left without telling them (which sounds reasonable to this parent!). "Why were you looking for me?" Jesus asked. "Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house?" Luke omits Joseph's and Mary's response, but does clue us into their utter confusion. Later in Luke we find the adult Jesus teaching daily in the Temple, and angrily clearing its courtyard of money changers and vendors – people there to worship their own god of greed rather than the Creator of the Universe. His actions and teachings further anger the priests, scribes, and leaders, until they can only see that Jesus must be eliminated.

What is it about God and the Temple that accelerates divisiveness? The Temple was built to be God's dwelling place on earth. King Solomon situated it in Jerusalem, which was decreed by his father King David as the only true place to worship God because the Ark of the Covenant was there, and the Ark was God's home on earth since the Exodus from Egypt. This decree,

however, was not taken lightly by those in the northern part of the kingdom. They followed prior traditions and worshiped God at shrines erected by Israel's forefathers. That the king could now decree that their worship spaces were moot was intolerable. Ultimately, the Temple, God's Dwelling Place, became the center of the Worship Wars between the Northern and Southern people: one catalyst that split the nation into two.

When we first read of David dreaming of the Temple, we are not certain God even wanted the Temple. 2 Samuel 7 tells of David stressing that God's ark was housed in a tent while David luxuriated in a palace. God responds, "Did I ever asked for a house? When did I ever utter one word to the prophets to spend your time this way?" God proceeds to tell David that *God* will build a house *from David* – a lineage who will "build a house for my name" by their actions (v. 13). David's son, Solomon, reverts this message back to his father's dream and builds the Temple, according to the very grand scale he was accustomed to living. God responds in 1 Kings 6, "About this temple you are building – if you observe my statues, carry our my ordinances, keep and obey all my commands, I will fulfill toward you the promise I made to your father David. I will dwell in the midst of the Israelites and will not forsake my people Israel." Note: God does not dwell with God's people because of the Temple; rather, God's presence is based on their trust and obedience. God will be looking at how they act towards God and each other, the temples in their hearts and not the edifices they erect to impress their neighbors.

The kingdom of Israel ultimately ignored God and embraced human conventions of military might and alliances to save itself from more powerful neighbors. Prophets such as Hosea, Amos, Jeremiah, and Isaiah all tell of God using the neighbors to overrun Israel because of their faithlessness. Ultimately, the two kingdoms were carried into exile – first the North (Israel) fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and the South (Judah) to Babylon in 586 B.C, and Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple were destroyed. In time, some exiles from Judah were set free and returned to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. They determined the reason God set their neighbors on them was because they were unfaithful to God. They became more fundamental in their beliefs and now more than ever, Jerusalem became *the* city of God, and the Temple was God's *only* house. If you don't worship here, you are not a true believer. The North, however, assimilated into Assyria and Samaria, never returned to the New Israel. They continued to worship God in the ways of their ancestors, not of Judah.

The New Testament story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:19-24) tells us the old worship war was alive and kicking during Jesus' lifetime. When the woman perceives Jesus is a prophet, she tries to get him to give the final answer to that age-old question dividing Southern Judah (now Israel) and the former Northern Israelites (now Samaritans). "Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you [Israelites] say that everyone must worship in Jerusalem." (v.20). Jesus does set her straight, but with a typical God answer that confounds more than answers: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem...The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth..." In a little bit the Temple humans built will no longer be relevant; indeed, soon Christ dies on the cross fulfilling the Servant role to become the Savior of the Universe, and in A.D.70 the Romans destroyed the Temple, and so it remains even to this day. But the house that God built, the lineage from David that humans buried, God raised up from the dead to be the new truth and spirit we are called to worship.

How interesting that the site deemed by to be the only place one could truly worship God, a building God never asked to be built, is where God-Jesus encounters great conflicts. Simeon was right: Jesus was destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that would be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. The higher ranking the person, the more Jesus' calls to change their lives and understanding of God were festering thorns. We oppose Jesus,

too, when he gets too close to our own life's sacred cows. How many times do we hear a wee voice as we read in Scriptures, "God can't really mean this – it must just be the translator, or the writer, who imposed their own thoughts onto God." How often do we echo Adam and Eve and listen to our own serpent, who lures us away from God's words? How often do we impose *our* own thoughts onto God?

As Martin Luther taught, we as humans can only revolt against anything God does to counter our expectations of what God should do or teach as our Savior. This is seen quite clearly in worship spaces throughout the world. A wise person once asked me, "Where else do you think Satan will be working the hardest, but where God's people gather to fellowship and worship? Where's the biggest battlefield – at the coffee houses or at worship?" Isn't it as true today as it was during Jesus' time – our own Temples are where we find the biggest schisms? Should people be astounded that some of history's greatest conflicts have been by and through the church / synagogue / mosque / temple? Passions are the highest, we are the most vulnerable, and attacks against our understanding of God – be we Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, or Atheist (worshipping our own mental powers as god) – touch us most viscerally.

But as all four Gospels teach us, God understands we are human and sent *God's* chosen for our Savior. Jesus is *not* our own invention; nor was Jesus sent *only* for us. Jesus was sent to save each and every person from their sins: by being God's servant to God's glory and submitting to the day's rulers' decision that his life should be short. Little did anyone know that by ridding themselves of their livelihood's threat, they completed God's Divine plan to rid the world of Satan's power. Jesus as God's Servant becomes the last Light of the World God needs – the only beacon we need to show us how to serve each other.

Simeon and Anna also are also models for us to emulate. Each spent their life praying and worshipping God in the Temple, trusting God's Holy Spirit to guide and lead them past what they could understand to what God wanted them to see. As we trust God to guide us, we too are given the strength to endure the temptations and powers that threaten our own lives, and we honor God by following Jesus' servant example.

A PRAYER for This Week

Oh, Most Confounding God, most of the time we may think we understand you, but we really don't. How could your life create such conflict when you are about teaching love? Why didn't you act like we would have – by destroying the human powers that were against you? How did your death on the cross mean *anything*? And how does *our* baptism into *your* death and resurrection seal our own fate to be saved by you? We find more questions the more we turn to you, and so we must become more like children and trust first.

We humbly and awe-struck pray for faith like Simeon's and Anna's – to trust you implicitly, to know that we *don't* need to understand *how* you operate, but that you *do* operate as the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe.

In Christ's name and only through your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Activities & Questions to Ponder

Create space and time when family faith dialogue can develop and flourish.

The activities suggested below are to foster faith activities at home, and to help reinforce the week's lesson.

God calls us to trust God first in our lives, and love our neighbor as ourselves. This week, work as a family to pray for God's guidance on how to live this out. Write out your ideas, and make a pact that all will help each other carry out their promises in love and forgiveness:

- ✦ As a family, choose two ways each to show God's love to those you live with. Maybe it's in how you do your chores. Maybe it's in how you help them in what they are trying to do, or a change they are trying to make. Maybe it's telling them you forgive them when they hurt you.
- ✦ As a family, choose two ways each to show God's love to those whom we work with – at school, at work, where we volunteer. Maybe it's by helping others with their work. Maybe it's by making sure to speak of others with positive and kind words. Maybe it's by inviting them to come to church with you to learn more about God.
- ✦ As a family, choose two ways each to spend your time and money to further God's work in your community, and in the world. Maybe it's by pledging to each other to give extra at church on Sundays. Maybe it's by volunteering within your community. Maybe it's by purchasing nutritious food and handing it to homeless people so they can eat. Maybe it's by writing to your congressional representatives about changes in laws that will bring more justice and mercy to those in need.
- ✦ As a family, set aside 15 minutes prayer time each day. Thank God for the blessings that God has given to you that you did not earn. Pray for each other, for your friends and enemies, for your neighbors, for your community, and for the world. Pray that God help you in your needs this week. Pray for specific needs that you know of others. Pray that God strengthen your church to be God's presence in your community. End your prayer together with praise to God for all God does in this world and in your lives.