

Long Awaited Gift



I remember traveling down a highway a few years ago during rush hour traffic, when I realized that the traffic up ahead had crawled to a stop. I expected to suffer a long wait and anticipated some sort of horrible accident.

As I inched closer to the "accident," I saw not crushed metal and broken glass, but a large Canada goose, very much alive. There he was, strolling down the middle of the highway, while busy commuters parted like the Red Sea to give him safe passage.

What an unexpected delight to find so many people, who ordinarily would have been very irritated with this delay, graciously and happily creating a safe haven for one of God's creatures.

Christmas is like that. We wait, impatiently, for something we suspect will crimp our schedules and lifestyles. Then, when we allow ourselves to slow down, we are surprised and delighted to find that a baby in a feeding trough, like that goose ambling down the highway, is the cause of the excitement, and not a burden at all.

It is the last chapter in the story of Jesus' birth, and only Luke tells how, in obedience to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph bundle up their six-week-old baby boy and made the day trip from Bethlehem to Jerusalem.

They had no lamb to present to the Temple - unless you count what Mary carried in her arms. Maybe that's what Simeon saw when the young couple stepped inside the Temple, pausing just inside the door, while their eyes adjusted to the light. He saw the Lamb of God in a little child.

According to Luke, Simeon was not supposed to be there that day. But feeling the pull of the spirit, Simeon followed it. Maybe it was something that happened to him often, for Simeon did not ignore the feeling that something big was about to happen- because that same spirit promised him he would not see death before he got a good look at God's chosen one.

Imagine being a young parent, going into a church, and an old man with white beard and cataract eyes shuffles up to you and asks to hold your baby? Mary must have decided he was okay because she and hands the baby over. Simeon held him in his arms, looks up, and said the most startling thing.

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for mine eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples."

Mary and Joseph heard the revelation about their son and they were amazed. Though the old man couldn't see three feet in front of him, he could read the child in his arms. This one had God written all over him.

When he handed the baby back, he blessed the parents and told them the rest of the truth. A bright light casts deep shadows. As many as rejoiced to learn who Jesus was just that many would grind their teeth against him. He would force people to choose: a relationship with God, or not. He would expose those who did not, and they would do their best to get rid of him.

It was a day to remember, for them and for us, only none of it would have happened without the law of Moses, the temple and the community of faith. Without those, we simply would not have this story, which is something to think about in an age like ours, when religion has become such an individual pursuit.

What if Simeon had decided to stay home that day and write in his journal, or Mary and Joseph had decided to postpone the presentation until her sister could make it down from Galilee, or what if Anna had gotten mad because no one ever listened to her prophecies and decided to leave the temple for the first time in 60-some years?

God would have had a much harder time arranging a revelation, that is what. Revelation requires people who are looking for God, and better yet, people who are looking for God together on some kind of regular basis.

When all of us put our pieces of the puzzle together, we get a much better picture than we can from turning one single piece around and around. That doesn't mean we will like what other people show us, necessarily. I doubt that Mary liked what Simeon told her at the end, any more than he liked telling her. But it was part of the picture, and God wanted them both to look at it.

Part of the continuing life of this story is that it tells us what is happening in our own temples, among those of us who come here week after week. Some of us come out of obedience to the law - remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy - and some of us come because we have been led by the Spirit. There are even some of us who never seem to leave this place, but are always puttering around somewhere, cleaning out closets, arranging the flowers.

However we get here, God gives us each other. God shapes us into a community capable of receiving revelation in Scripture, in sacrament, in each other's faces. We take turns saying what we see. Sometimes, like Anna, we get to announce that God is here.

Whoever we are, whatever role we get to play, the point is to keep looking - together - so that we do not miss the light when he comes.

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Luke 2:22-40
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