

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC  
January 1, 2006

## **The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple**

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### **Reflection 1: It's all about the journey**

The first part of Luke's Gospel is full of to-ing and fro-ing. An angel comes from heaven to talk with skeptical Zachariah about the impending birth of a son – Zachariah and Elizabeth's son, though Elizabeth was well past child bearing age. Gabriel, another angel, then arrives to talk with Mary. Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth – and then, after 3 months (!) she returns home. After Caesar Augustus' decree, Mary and Joseph travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Luke is silent about the return trip, but it must have happened. No sooner were Mary and Joseph settling into life with a new baby than it was time to pack up and take the whole family to Jerusalem. Luke is silent about that trip also. It was a big deal journey. It's about 60 miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem, about the same as from here to Worcester. To the Bourne bridge. Never mind. It was looooooonger in those days. It's likely they were accompanied by others making this journey, perhaps even Zechariah and Elizabeth, with baby John the Baptist.

What would Jesus' parents have packed for this trip?

Credit cards, diapers, fast lane transponders... Sandwiches... Well, yes, maybe sandwiches, indeed! Perhaps peanut and jelly sandwiches in a brown paper sack decorated with a crayon'ed greeting cheering up whoever received it. Maybe a tuna fish sandwich, or ham and cheese ... or, on second thought, maybe not a ham and cheese sandwich.

Culturally, and to varying degrees, personally, we tend to think ahead. We want to be prepared for what happens next. Over time we learn we can't plan everything. Some of this we label "hard knocks", some God's will; some we see as hubris, some as grace. But food would have been in the traveler's pouches, almost certainly. Not so much for themselves, but for others they might meet along the way. One of the scandals of Jesus' birth is the "no room in the inn" part: Middle Eastern hospitality requires that accommodation and food be provided to the stranger. That there would not be room made for a pregnant woman was unthinkable, and perhaps this recent experience informed Mary and Joseph's preparations for this journey: bringing sandwiches in case someone else had been treated as they had recently been treated.

Therefore, sandwiches are important – not so much the things we hoard out of a sense of scarcity, as if God did not know that everyone needs to eat. This Sunday of Christmas Tide, we thank God for sandwiches, the people who make them and the people who eat them on the Way of Hospitality, all part of God's plan for the Journey. Amen.

## Reflection #2: Yes, but where are we going?

Luke's story doesn't say anything about the eagerness of Mary and Joseph to go to Jerusalem. Maybe it was merely an obligation, like something we make New Years resolutions about.

Regardless of enthusiasm or dread, it certainly seems Mary and Joseph knew *where* and *why* they were going to Jerusalem. Experts think Luke conflates several Jewish practices into a big obligatory muddle in this story, but it's reasonable to think that Mary and Joseph knew why they were going to the temple even if Luke is confused. This trip was more than a trivial errand. They were going to the temple for a reason: to present Jesus to God. So it's also reasonable to think they knew what to expect when they arrived.

It's Simeon, who, despite his years of waiting and expecting, seems a bit surprised. Turns out he was right on target, at least in part. He figured that if the Consolation of Israel were to appear, the action would certainly be at the most holy of holies of the Hebrew people, the temple at Jerusalem. One day Simeon was called by the Spirit to hurry to the temple, whereupon he saw – not a great, important, powerful person, like people who had visited the temple over the years. Simeon saw the person he'd been promised he'd live long enough to see – if not the person he expected. And this sight – of a child – prompted Simeon to look forward and backward in time.

Simeon's response to the baby Jesus is filled with looking back and ahead. In effect, he says: This changes everything: It's clear that things will go differently now, even if some things will be difficult. But he also says: See! God is faithful! God's promises can be trusted!

Recently I had the privilege of participating in a meeting with members of the First Church stewardship committee, Mary and Dan and a few other leaders of this wonderful church. The conversation was about First Church's vision, and how that vision – the Way of Hospitality: Open Door, Open Road, Open Spirit, Open Table – had been in evidence over the past couple of years. What difference, in other words, had it made?

They cited things like...the depths to which the vision of Way of Hospitality had been inculcated in the very fabric and culture of First Church, and the stewardship implications of this emerging "time" at First Church. They named openness – like, interpersonal courage to have difficult conversations, openness and partnership connections with the UCC and openness in new and vital connections with the greater community, like GBIO. They shared examples of worship moments that moved and burned their hearts on the Way of Hospitality. And in a myriad of ways, they told of growth in faith that comes from small groups studying, doing, praying - together. They looked back with laughter, a few sighs of frustration, and a deep sense of wonder and gratitude to God.

As with that conversation, Christmastide and journeys are also a time to look forward. It's clear things will be different in the days ahead, perhaps even difficult at times. The promised vision of Jesus, the lived vision of the Way of Hospitality makes that prediction a virtual certainty.

Imagine for a moment, where First Church's vision of a Way of Hospitality might lead this year. What visitor at this "temple", which fellow traveler on the Way of Hospitality will allow us to see other dimensions of God's call to us? Where will the Holy Spirit call us to go? There will be difficulties, we know – in spite of, or because of – our plans. We know there will be Consolation. May we be ready as Simeon for new life in God's promises. Amen again.

### **Reflection #3: And what are we praying for?**

We pray for peace on earth. For justice. For a job. Perhaps even for impeachment. These days, we don't usually use the term: Consolation of Israel. However comfort, comfort ye my people is a familiar seasonal refrain – some of us can hum it, thanks to George Frederick Handel. We pray for comfort, for direction, for health, for safety, for laughter and tears of joy.

What model of prayer does the prophetess Ana provide us? She wasn't one to work, apparently, except at worship, fasting and prayer. Luke doesn't tell us what she prayed for - her words are not captured in the gospel account, unfortunately, though she prayed constantly for decades. She's one of the few women designated as a "prophetess" in the Bible, but we don't know what she prophesied about. Ana is important and notable not just because she was *there*, at the temple, for years and years, but because she knew what to do when learning of Christ's birth:

- Thank God;
- Celebrate what she had experienced at the temple; and
- Tell all about the Child born to Mary and Joseph.

Really, now. If you're still looking for a New Years resolution, this could be it!

This Comfort, the Consolation of our new life with God through the savior born a child is a lived prayer of thanksgiving, celebration and sharing. Thanks be to God!

Amen and amen and amen!