

Christmas 1
December 27, 2020

2 Days Later
Luke 2:22-40

So here we are on December 27, two days after Christmas. The truth is, for a very great many people, there's a sense of letdown today. That's the trouble with special events — the letdown that so often follows. We spend so much time, energy and money — both as individuals and as a congregation — in preparing for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, that a letdown is almost inevitable. And especially this year, I know I just wanted the spirit of Christmas to never go away, so that we could put everything else that happened this year out of mind and out of sight.

But now it is December 27, two days later. And some of you, I know may be muttering, “And it looks like two days after Christmas, too!”

If you're feeling a letdown this morning, I have good news for you. There's no reason for a letdown, because Christmas didn't end on December 25. To the contrary, that was just the beginning. To make myself clear, let me take you back to the first Christmas.

Let me note, first of all, that the first Christmas was marked by an almost unbelievable period of anticipation. If you and I invested ourselves in emotional and physical preparation for this Christmas, consider for a moment that peasant girl named Mary. She had nine months to think about the original Christmas.

There were months when she had to wonder repeatedly why God had chosen her. Months of very real anguish over what the people in her village were saying about her, even as her body grew with each passing day. Months, too, when Mary must have marveled at the way her fiancé, Joseph, had somehow become an extraordinary man of

faith. Then there was an arduous journey of four or five days, most of it on foot but occasionally on a donkey — not much better, really! — only to find that there was no place to stay, even as birth pangs began to settle in.

And then there was Christmas, and Mary had the baby in her arms. Shepherds came to see the baby (they were a scruffy lot). They said they had gotten the word from angels. Mary found this easy to believe, because it was an angel who briefed her nine months earlier. Besides, Mary heard angel choirs in her heart, without benefit of any visible company. It was Christmas — and in a phrase from our day, Mary might well have said, “It doesn’t get any better than this.” But she was wrong. Christmas wasn’t over. It had just begun.

The story continues with a ceremonial event, something that for devout Jews like Mary and Joseph was inseparable from a birth itself. At an appropriate, appointed time, parents were to present their newborn child to the Lord in what was known as a ceremony of purification. Joseph and Mary came to the temple in Jerusalem alone; no family with them. For one thing, their families were several days’ journey away. But I wonder if perhaps their families weren’t especially anxious to celebrate the birth of this child who seemed, by popular gossip, to have been conceived before Joseph and Mary were officially married.

So, on this day when one naturally wanted others to join in the festivity, much like it was for us this year during Easter, Thanksgiving, and now Christmas, it looked as if instead it would be a rather lonely day: sacred and beautiful to Mary and Joseph, but lonely, too.

And they were poor, too. We know this by their ceremonial provisions for the day. Their religious law called for parents to bring a lamb for sacrifice on this day — but if

they were too poor, they could bring a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. This is what Mary and Joseph brought: the poor people's offering.

Which is to say: For Mary and Joseph, the first Christmas was a bargain-counter affair. Some of us can remember Christmases when we were poor, especially those of us who can remember Christmas before there were credit cards! We may talk sentimentally about it now, about how we made do with little and enjoyed it. But not many of us want to return to a poverty celebration.

So, there they were, a village peasant family in the big city, quite alone, noticeably poor. As far as we know, the ceremony went off without a hitch. Then, out of nowhere, a family appeared to join them.

Joseph and Mary had never seen them before, and there was no claim to blood connection, but they were family, no doubt about it, the kind of family that would mark their child's life from there to eternity — the family of faith.

First it was an older man. We don't know how old he was, but we know that God had promised him that he would live to see this day, so we assume either that he was very old or that he had some illness that made death seem threatening. The Bible tells us that his name was Simeon.

Simeon came up to Joseph and Mary as if they were his family, and took the baby from them as if he had the right to do so. Then Simeon began to praise God. I mean, really! Holding the baby, he said, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your

people Israel.”

Now in case you didn't get it, Simeon was announcing first of all that he was ready to die now that he had seen this baby; and furthermore, that this baby's birth was a world-class event. It was something that would bring glory to the nation of Israel, which hadn't had much glory for at least 600 years, and that would bring light to the Gentiles — which meant all the rest of the world. Obviously, this was something very big; much bigger, when you think of it, than the visit by the shepherds. I wouldn't blame Mary if at this moment she thought to herself: I wish all the folks back in Nazareth could hear this!

Simeon had hardly finished his speech when an elderly woman — 84, to be exact — who had been a widow since she was in her early 20s, came up to extend her congratulations. And she did so in a fashion just as remarkable as what Simeon had done. The woman's name was Anna. She was a woman of great faith. Anna spent all her time in the temple, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. Anna was so moved by the sight of this child that she insisted on telling everyone about the unique significance of this baby.

It was quite a day for Mary and Joseph. It was a kind of exclamation point on what had happened 40 days earlier, when Jesus was born. On the night when Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph might rightly have said, “Now what? Is this all there is?” But at this event in Jerusalem, the Spirit of God was announcing that what had happened in Bethlehem was only the beginning; it was going to spread around the whole world and go on and on, beyond anything anybody could imagine. What had happened at Bethlehem was not simply the birth of a baby — not even a miracle baby — but the birth of a new age, the birth of the kingdom of heaven, come upon the earth.

Even so, on this second day after Christmas, in the year of our Lord, 2020, Christmas isn't over. In our celebration on You-tube a few days ago we had a chance for our Lord's birth to be reborn in all our hearts. The you-tube service reminded us of how much God loves our world — and how much God loves each of us! — and that God's kingdom is still coming, because God hasn't given up on our world.

Maybe you wonder how I know all this. I know it because Simeon and Anna are here on You-tube this morning. It's now two days after Christmas, and the faithful ones, the ones who have waited for our Lord, are right here, glad once again to be worshipping the Christ child, the Babe of Bethlehem, our Lord.

Anna may be 10 years old and wiggling in her seat or 85 and weary, and Simeon may be 9 and getting restless, or 90 and rather sleepy: But I would know you anywhere, Simeon and Anna. And I'm not surprised you're watching this service this morning, two days after Christmas. There's no Christmas letdown for you!