

“An Unusual Baby Dedication”

Luke 2:22-38

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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Mother’s Day

This morning our attention is drawn to the description of a baby dedication in the Temple in Jerusalem over two thousand years ago. The proud parents were Mary and Joseph, and the name given to their first born child was Jesus.

I don’t know if any family members were with them for this special occasion, but Luke tells us two people were sent by God to join Mary and Joseph and to take part in this ancient ritual. Their names were Simeon and Anna. Though not related, their reason for being there was the same and their messages were identical. Listen as I share an overview of this tender story.

Luke records that Mary and Joseph stayed around Jerusalem for forty days after the birth of Jesus. On the eighth day, they took Jesus to the Temple to have him circumcised and to declare his name, marking his acceptance into the covenant community.

On the fortieth day after Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph returned to the Temple to dedicate Jesus to the Lord and to present a thanksgiving offering to God. It was during this event that Simeon and Anna showed up and offered their prophetic words.

Simeon was a righteous and devout man who had waited all his life for “the consolation of Israel,” the coming Messiah who would reflect the nature of God and pursue justice and peace in a broken world. Anna was a pious prophet who stayed in the Temple day and night

praying and fasting. Needless to say, both of these individuals took their faith seriously and were in tune with God's guiding Spirit.

As soon as Simeon saw Mary and Joseph, he took baby Jesus in his arms. Immediately, Simeon sensed God was at work in Jesus and offered a song of gratitude and praise to God. Anna followed with a similar blessing, affirming what God was doing in their midst.

When I read this story, I am most intrigued by the final words Simeon addressed to Mary.

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul, too." (Luke 2:34-5)

This is the first reference in Luke's gospel to the resistance Jesus would face in his public ministry at the hands of many of Israel's leaders. The fall of those in lofty positions of prestige and power due to corruption and the subsequent rise of those they had crushed by their abuse of power would create a massive backlash. Jesus would become the target of scorn from the leaders who felt threatened by him and pay a high price for speaking truth to power.

To her dismay, Jesus' mother, Mary, would watch in disbelief as all this played out in front of her. Sadly, Simeon predicted she would bury this child of promise who would make hope visible everywhere he went. For this reason, Mary is often referred to as the "Mother of Sorrows."

Why did Simeon share this dire prediction with Mary on this happy occasion? This baby dedication, like all that had gone before and would follow, was a joyful time. Simeon had to know how disturbed Mary would be upon hearing this and how his words would change the atmosphere.

Why then and not later? I suspect Simeon knew Mary and Joseph were going back home to Nazareth as soon as the dedication concluded, and he might never see them again. This message from God, as harsh as it sounded, had to be delivered at that time.

What was his purpose for sharing it? What did he want Mary to understand?

Certainly, I believe he wanted Mary to know how important Jesus was to everyone in Israel who had been praying for God to raise up a leader that would fulfill the prophets' highest hopes and grandest dreams, but I also believe he wanted Mary to know how important she was.

The fate of the world rested in her hands. The role she would play in the formative years of Jesus' life would have eternal consequences.

I wonder if God holds his breath every time we welcome a new baby into our families. I suspect God does.

This story reminds me once again how important parenting is. I know of no greater responsibility.

Every baby is born with so much potential. Each one bears God's image and has been given talents and abilities that, if used wisely, can make the world better for everyone.

No baby knows this at birth. Each one relies upon parents and caregivers to teach, to guide, to motivate and to inspire them. Every child looks to mentors to help them discern God's dreams for them and to instill confidence in them as they pursue those dreams.

Who did this for you? Who helped you to draw close to God and to chart your course? Who encouraged you to reach for the stars?

Who convinced you not to settle for less than your best by taking the path of least resistance? Who helped you to overcome the fear of failure or to avoid the temptation to be selfish and greedy? Who showed you the devastating consequences of misplaced values and priorities?

Who picked you up and gave you another chance when you stumbled and fell? Who loved you at your best and celebrated your achievements but also loved you at your worst and cried with you when your heart was broken?

Chances are your mother is in this picture. If so, thank God for her and the others who have or continue to walk with you on your journey of faith.

Make them proud of their investment in you by being a person of integrity who strives at all times and in all places to be honest and trustworthy, reliable and dependable, loyal and faithful, kind and thoughtful, compassionate and generous, patient and tolerant, courageous and confident, responsible and industrious, respectful and humble. Be the role model for others your mentors have been for you.

I can think of no greater Mother's Day gift.