

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

First Sunday of Christmas • December 31, 2017

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 • Psalm 148 • Galatians 4:4-7 • Luke 2:22-40

It seems like Mary can't catch a break. Last week, we heard Luke's nativity story. And after giving birth to her new son, Mary settles down to get some rest. And as soon as she puts her head down to relax, she hears some people talking outside. Joseph promises to take care of it, but instead of telling them to keep it down, Joseph decides to invite them inside. Great. And so the shepherds come inside and tell her all about what the angel told them. About how this new child was going to be the Messiah. And according to St. Luke, everyone who was there was amazed. Everyone, that is, except Mary. Mary, we're told, remembered all the shepherds' words and pondered them in her heart. What did all this mean?

And Mary had a long time to ponder those words. We're told that she and Joseph spent eight days in Bethlehem before they went up to Jerusalem for the traditional circumcision and presentation. So like any good, dutiful parent, you know what you have to do. They can't afford the two doves for the ritual sacrifice, so they have to settle for two pigeons. Close enough. And you have to think that all Mary really wants to do now is go home. Let's just do the ritual and get it over with.

It's interesting, unusual even, that Luke tells us about Jesus being circumcised. Because Luke isn't especially interested in Jesus's Jewishness. Matthew very interested in Jesus's Jewishness. Matthew's whole gospel is filled with Jewish themes and allusions. But Luke really isn't. Luke tends to view the world less through religious identity than through divisions of class, wealth, and social status. To use our contemporary language, Luke is the most "woke" of the four gospel writers. And yet at the very beginning of Luke's gospel, he makes a big point of Jesus getting circumcised.

The most likely reason Luke tells us about Jesus's circumcision is because he wants us to know that Jesus can feel pain. That Jesus isn't someone who floats through the world without being affected by it. Maybe he wants us to know that Jesus can feel pain because he wants to prove that Jesus is a real flesh and blood human. But that seems well established by this point. It seems more likely that the reason Luke wants to tell us about Jesus's ability to feel pain is because it's impossible to love without feeling pain. The ability to love other people depends on our capacity to be hurt, to be taken advantage of, to experience loss. The ability to love depends on vulnerability.

But that's certainly not what Mary is thinking about as they go to the temple in Jerusalem. She is just trying to get home. Let's just get in and get out. And like all trips that start out with "Let's just get in and get out," things don't go to plan. Because when Joseph and Mary get to the temple, they run into a man named Simeon. And Simeon is something of a temple institution. And Simeon has been waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. He's been waiting for the person to come along to restore the community to what God intended it to be. And when he was younger, it seemed possible that the Messiah was going to come any day. But days turned into months turned into years. And one day Simeon was old. And so he started to come to terms with the fact that he wasn't going to live to see the Messiah. And Luke tells us that while Simeon was grieving the years he spent hoping for no reason, he received a promise from God that he would see the Messiah before he died.

And so when Joseph and Mary walk into the temple holding Jesus, what to Mary and Joseph is a formality to get through, this day becomes the best day of Simeon's life. And when he sees this little baby, Simeon thinks, "This is it. The messiah I've been waiting for." So he runs over and grabs Jesus from Mary's arms and sings a song of praise. A song that begins with that little line that's so full of meaning. "Now Lord, you are dismissing your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your

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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 that I’ve seen this child, the messiah, Simeon says, I can die in peace. Because I know that God keeps God’s promises. I know that the redemption of Israel that I’ve been waiting for is going to happen. And I know that God hasn’t abandoned me.

That vulnerability that Simeon carried is one of the toughest of all to embody. That just as love requires vulnerability, so does hope. Because true hope requires the possibility that you could be wrong. That Simeon could have spent his entire life waiting for something that was never going to come. That’s why Simeon can’t help but burst into song when he sees the messiah he’s been waiting for. Because hope without risk isn’t hope at all. It’s just the banality of positive thinking.

St. Luke tells us that when Simeon said these things, Mary and Joseph were, understandably, amazed. And then right as Simeon is about to hand Jesus back to Mary, he says something else. “That Jesus is a sign that many will oppose.” That this child will grow up to be offensive to some and inconvenient to many. That he will not have an easy life. Which Mary may have figured. A bit of an odd note to end on, but understandable. And then Simeon says something truly shocking to Mary. “And a sword will pierce your soul too.” That by saying “Yes” to God’s invitation to bear Jesus, Mary has also said “Yes” to a life of great difficulty. That by loving this child, Mary has opened herself up to being hurt. That Mary won’t be able to watch Jesus as a bystander. That Jesus’s difficulties, fears, and griefs will become her own. By opening herself up to loving this child, a sword will pierce her own soul.

Vulnerability isn’t what most of us would consider a virtue. Most of us spend our lives trying not to seem vulnerable. To be self-sufficient. Not to rely on other people. To take care of things ourselves. When people describe their hopes for their children, they talk about things like raising kids who treat people with respect. Or raising kids who know the value of work. No one ever talks about wanting to raise kids who know how to be vulnerable. But according to St. Luke, vulnerability is what makes it possible to love. All of those other things we talk about, treating people with respect, knowing the value of work, being part of a family, all depend on vulnerability.

Just as an aside, this is actually why we do pre-marital counseling in the church. Not to decide who should or shouldn’t get married or partnered. Not to give people advice for how to be in a relationship. But because vulnerability is so powerful that it needs to be handled carefully. That’s why the biggest red flag you can hear in pre-marital counseling isn’t an argument about money or kids or religion or family. It’s couples who say that they don’t argue. Because couples who say that they don’t argue just mean that they don’t realize they’re arguing. And if they don’t realize that they’re arguing, it’s only a matter of time before someone’s vulnerability becomes just another opportunity to win the argument. And once you start weaponizing intimacy, it’s hard to regain that sense of trust. That’s especially true for couples but it’s also true for family members and close friendships. Strangers can annoy us, acquaintances can be abrasive, but only the people we love can truly devastate us.

Part of the reason we don’t consider vulnerability to be a virtue is that we think it is a kind of weakness. But according to St. Luke, vulnerability is strength. Because vulnerability creates space for the Kingdom of God to shine forth in our lives. That’s why St. Luke puts this story front and center in his gospel. Jesus becomes vulnerable precisely so that we can have the strength to love. So that, like Mary, we can love without having our love choked by the fear of being hurt. So that, like Simeon, we can hope without the fear of being disappointed. And like Anna, we can witness without the fear of being inadequate.

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Simeon seems to be making a prediction about Mary's life, but he may be offering a universal truth. That if you seek to follow Jesus, there will be loss involved. For Mary that loss is the death of her son. For some of us it's the loss of something that made us feel secure. For others of us it's the loss of an illusion about ourselves we talked ourself into. Your soul will be pierced, Simeon says. But if your heart isn't hurt while following Jesus, it will wilt away waiting to be used.

The author C.S. Lewis once alluded to that when he wrote, "Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable." Lewis suggests that what so many of us consider strength is actually weakness. That when we think our hearts are getting stronger, they are actually just becoming hardened.

In Jesus, God chooses to share in our vulnerability. To open Godself up to being hurt, to being wronged, to being disappointed. In Jesus, God also chooses to love us by becoming one of us. Inviting us to share in opening our hearts to the needs of the world. God does not merely hear our prayers, but, in Jesus, our pains and sorrows, our hopes and fears, are taken into the very heart of God.

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