

Joy to the World Lk 2:22-40

Jesus has come! Jesus has come to dwell among us! God is so good! We have so much to celebrate. After Christmas is over it's easy to come down hard after the sugar and celebration high. It's easy to begin looking at that Christmas tree and wonder when we'll have the energy to take it down, to take back presents we didn't like, to not eat any more cookies or bad stuff. It's easy to forget that Christmas is just the beginning. Jesus was born in Bethlehem so that we could begin a relationship with him. Christmas is the wedding. Advent was spent getting ready for the wedding that happened at Christmas, God coming to dwell with us in the flesh. We're on the honey moon right now. So don't stop celebrating yet. This is the time to get to know Jesus better than ever before. This is the time to become intimate with his presence in our lives. What will this mean for us at the end of 2008 and the beginning of a new year? God has come to dwell with us in the flesh.

Our story today is about the presentation of Jesus in the temple. It was the law that boys be circumcised at 8 days. Most of us don't do that anymore. But for them, this is what it meant to be one of the people of God. After circumcision they waited for a week and then another month. The mother had to be purified. And this was the required amount of time after a birth for her to be purified. Then when the time had passed they were to bring a sacrifice to the temple to complete the cleansing. Personally I think women would have appreciated this time to recover from the birth and get back into sociable state. In any case Jesus was about 6 weeks old when he came to the temple for the first time.

It was also the law that the first born son in a family was to be given to the Lord in service and an offering given to redeem the child from that obligation. But Jesus was given to the work of God...which is of course why at age 12 he spent time in the temple talking with the elders and not going home with his parents. I'm not really sure if the doves were given for a purification of Mary or if they were the redemption price for Jesus. In any case this was the law. Mary and Joseph were careful to follow the traditions of their time.

Jesus was carried into the Temple and there he was met by 2 elderly persons who had been led there by a promise. 2 persons who loved the Lord with all their hearts and had been waiting to hear a word of hope for their people. The first was Simeon. What does he say about this child? Simeon had been promised by God that he would not die till he had seen the Messiah. And he listened to God and was led to the temple at that time. We don't know anything else about Simeon. All we know is that he was sensitive to God's voice and full of hope and yearning to touch the face of God. What can this holy man tell us?

Have you ever yearned for something? Longed for something with all your heart? Have you ever pined for something or someone? I've heard stories of mothers who pray for their

children's salvation for years and years. I've heard that sometimes their children don't come to faith during their mother's lifetimes, but that after her death they come to the feet of God. I've also heard stories of people who long to win the lottery, who spend all their money at the gaming tables seeking money to solve their problems and finding disaster instead. Have you ever been so hungry that you tremble? There are all kinds of longings and yearnings. Simeon was yearning for the salvation of his people with all his heart.

On seeing the child in the temple he comes, takes the infant Jesus into his arms and he says: *Lord, now I can die in peace, just as you've promised, because I have now seen the salvation for all peoples, for the Gentiles, and for the Jews.* Simeon saw beyond the Jewish people. He saw beyond the traditions of the times. He saw beyond exclusivity, to inclusivity. He saw the kingdom of God at hand. He saw God's love for the world so great that God had sent God's only son that whosoever, Jew, Gentile, anyone who believed in this child Jesus would not go to hell, but have life eternally with God. Simeon saw this.

Then he turns to the parents who are standing there with mouths agape. And he says gently, firmly to them in rather poetic language: *This child is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel, for a sign that is spoken against, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed.*

Now that's a little harder to understand isn't it? But it is true. It is true that Jesus lifted up the brokenhearted, he pulled down the authorities. Jesus healed people whether rich or poor. He didn't make differences between people. Jesus levels the playing field. That was Jesus. He lifted up some and pulled down others. And he was definitely hated by some. People spoke out against him to the point that they killed him in the end.

And the sword that pierced Mary? Was that not seeing her child die? Was that not watching her son grow up and do things that seemed crazy to her? It is one of the most difficult griefs to see our children die especially in a violent and unjust way. Women, over the centuries have experienced this grief. Wars take our children. Think of those mothers in Africa whose children were taken away to be soldiers while they were still so young...5,6, 12 year olds, forced to kill, soon to die. I can think of few things more horrible. Mary saw her son tortured and crucified. Yes, a sword pierced her soul also.

The second witness to Jesus dedication at the temple is a woman. How appropriate. 2 witnesses were needed in a court of law... I'm not sure if a woman would have been an acceptable witness in a Jewish court of law. But in the court of our God a woman is acceptable. Anna was a widow. She had been married only 7 years before her husband died. And she spent her time at the temple. She was like a nun, a contemplative, giving her life to prayer and devotion. She was about 87 years old when she saw the child Jesus. When she sees him it's as if

she recognized him. Sometimes I think that's how it's going to be when we die. We're so afraid but I think when we get there, there will be a recognition that this is what it's been all along that we were waiting for. This is it. That elusive something in our lives.

Anna recognizes Jesus. And she proclaims to all who will listen about this child who has come to save the world. I think it is easy as we age and time flies by to give up hope, give up faith, give up the struggle. But these 2 witnesses are a model for us to continue to persevere and hope throughout our lives to the very end. When we are young, life stretches out in front of us and we think we have forever. But as we age we begin to realize that life is so very short and we have accomplished so very little. It is easy to despair when we see how much still needs to be done. It is easy to despair when we see no hope for change, for our dreams. But Simeon and Anna had their priorities right. They looked to God to do what needed doing. Especially in the very old, I have seen time and again thoughts about God coming out. As people prepare to die, they begin to think about what's coming next. They begin to think about seeing the face of God. It's a wonderful time. Simeon and Anna had a wonderful gift from God to hold the Messiah in their arms. To speak of his promise to those around. Imagine holding salvation in your arms. Joy to the world!

So how does this touch us, in this honeymoon after Christmas? If Jesus birth at Christmas happens in our hearts then Jesus is growing in our lives now. As we focus on this growing of Jesus in our lives we will experience the same joy and the same longing that Simeon and Anna experienced. Jesus is here with us. He dwells in the hearts of those who believe in him. And as we walk with him daily others will see his face in ours as well. The closer we walk with Jesus, the more salvation this world will see. The more that we allow his hands to move ours, his words to move our words, our feet to carry us in his way the more hope there is for this world. Don't let him go. Cling to the Lord. The world is counting on us to bring light and life and hope.

Think of a time when you felt closer to Jesus than at any other time. Perhaps at camp when you were young. Perhaps on a summers evening sitting out on the porch and listening to the night sounds. Perhaps at the top of a mountain as you prepared to ski down. Perhaps at the shore as you watched the waves beat slowly on the sand. Perhaps at the birth of a child when you wondered at the new life. There are times in all of our lives when God seems close. And at those times was there not joy?

Jesus said that he is the vine and we are the branches. As a branch cannot live and bear fruit unless it is connected in a vital way to the vine, so we need to be intimately connected to Jesus in order to live the abundant life that he so freely offers to us. Has it been a long time since Jesus dwelt in our hearts? Perhaps never. Take this opportunity at the end of an old year, and at the beginning of a new one to invite Jesus into your heart in a new way. What that might mean is different for each of us. It may mean giving up bad habits and spending patterns. It may

mean changing our priorities to be more people oriented or more world sensitive. I don't know what it will mean for you. But I do know who holds our lives in his hands. And I do know that he loves us more than we can ever imagine. And I know that he holds our futures.

So I can say with confidence that to dwell with the Lord is to live in joy and praise. There is no greater joy than this. Joy to the world the Lord has come!