FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*It’s Complicated* Luke 2:22-40

A great deal has happened in the life of Mary and Joseph—especially Mary. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary has very quickly moved from young, unmarried woman to wife and mother. Along the way, she was visited by an angel who had the most amazing stories to tell about herself and her cousin, Elizabeth. She has gone on a journey to Elizaeth’s house and witnessed for herself *Elizabeth’s* miracle pregnancy. She has hosted shepherds who fell on their knees before her own miracle infant—*shepherds!* Not royalty or wealth but poor, outcast shepherds. Perhaps her own reticence was softened or diminished altogether by her awareness that she and Joseph were also poor.

Life has been full of miracles and commotion, as if having a baby were not enough. Despite all of this, it is important to Mary and Joseph that they follow the religious traditions of Judaism. This is why and where we find them in this morning’s passage that was just read for us. They have brought their son—their first-born son—to the Temple in Jerusalem for Jesus’ dedication—just as the Law of Moses describes in Leviticus.

Luke makes sure we are aware of their motivation by mentioning it four times in this passage. Jesus is to be dedicated to the service of God. He and his earthly parents are poor. So, the sacrifice they offer on his behalf are “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” [v.24]

As we heard, as they were on their way to do “what was customary under the Law,” [27] they were met by both Simeon and Anna—two very senior, very devout members of their faith. Both of these older people begin to rejoice as soon as they see the infant in Mary’s arms.

As one writer has described it:

*“In this lovely moment, Simeon and Anna carry with them the history and longing of their people. Mary and Joseph carry not only their son, but the hope of Israel’s future. Past, present, and future meet in one intimate, brief moment in the Temple.”*

Both offer their blessing. However, although Simeon praises God, he also describes a future that will also be filled with challenge. Even as he rejoices and praises God for having allowed him to live long enough to meet Jesus, Simeon also speaks of the opposition that Jesus will face. He speaks of the heartache that will come to those who love him—indicating Mary in particular—and how this will be “a sword” that will pierce her “own soul too.” [35] Simeon holds together the joy and contentment of the moment, alongside the sorrow that is to come.

Earlier, when the shepherds and the angles were bustling around Jesus’ manger cradle in Bethlehem, Luke says Mary “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” [19] One can only wonder what thoughts and fears were laid upon her heart during this meeting. Yet, it must be said that they have “been blessed with joy and truth.”

That is always the way it is with people of faith. We come to this place, or we quietly pray or read the Bible at home, and we derive (I sincerely hope) all sorts of joy and comfort in the faith we nurture by doing these things. I hope that your attendance here helps you make your way through whatever personal challenges you encounter in your life. And I hope you will always allow me and your sisters and brothers here, in Christ, to pray with and for you through whatever life brings to your door.

Having said that, I hope you have also acknowledged that our faith will not keep us safe from the daily trials and troubles that come with human life. Indeed, the paradox of being people of faith is that rather than *simplify* life, being people of faith challenges us to ask hard questions that “open up” the issue, rather than close it down as settled. This is because our faith demands that we not settle for easy answers.

Instead, we are called upon to face inconvenient truths and struggle with them until there is a way forward that provides as much truth and fairness as we can make for all. And we are meant to do this with the understanding—and the commitment—that we will always need to think and dialogue and review and revise, so that even more justice and fairness may prevail among us.

Recently, actually a couple of days ago, I was having a conversation with a friend. She was lamenting the many people throughout the world who are being confronted with refugees—the way it is changing the very nature of the countries where the immigrants were landing in large numbers. The conversation, of course, turned briefly to the many people who have been coming into our country illegally through the southern states.

We talked a little about Gov. Abbot of Texas, who was in the news a few months ago for busing and flying people arrested by immigration to other states—like Martha’s Vineyard in Massachusetts. I pointed out that while this was a creative and pointed commentary on the unfair burden Texas has to assume, that it was also wrong. It was wrong to use people—living, breathing people, including children—to make his point. You do not do that unless you are able to ignore their humanity. You do it only if you can reduce other people to “problems” and “irritations to be dealt with.”

I suggested that if we could only fix the immigration system we might have an easier time with illegal immigrants. My friend insisted that our immigration system is fine if people would just follow the rules, and I do understand her point. We all do.

We all follow the rules, and we want others to do so too. We put rules and laws in place so that we all know where we stand and how to live together as harmoniously as possible. And as you may have noticed, we have bodies of people who are constantly working to make them clearer and (hopefully) fairer. It does not always work out that way, but that is at least the goal.

However, and this is the difficult part, the complicated part, we can only go forward if we are willing to take the time and the effort to actually know what the problems are. Not just the legislative bodies, but us, too, you and me.

And when it comes to the immigration laws in this country, we need to grasp and grapple with the fact that there is nothing that is simple and straightforward about any of those laws. Except that they are overly restrictive and complicated, which also makes them difficult to follow, especially when you come from a place of crisis. Moreover, our immigration laws are expensive to enforce, as Gov. Abbot and others have been very vocal about.

It is easy to simply demand people follow the rules. The harder thing is to stop using immigrants as political pawns because doing so always brings emotion (especially fear) into the discussion, this makes it even harder to make progress, but easier to move people by making them fearful. And make no mistake: immigrants are not the only group of people to be used this way.

That is what the story of Jesus is all about—especially his birth and his dedication in the Temple. It is important to remember the numerous times people like the shepherds are mentioned, and the way in which Mary and Jospeh are portrayed as poor people.

In their time, and in ours, the poor, the immigrant, the one or the group that is different, there will always be the temptation to reduce them to a problem than to receive them as human beings with the same hopes and needs as ourselves. Such things are complications that we grow weary of having to deal with.

However, this is how Jesus, and his parents are presented to us. They are “the poor.” They are a problem to be dealt with as human beings…the question is: can “the poor” also become to us human beings to work with, struggle with, and live with shoulder-to-shoulder? Can we complicate our lives by seeing, as Mother Theresa once said, “the face of Jesus in the distressing disguise of the poor?” Can we see Jesus in the many bodies in which he comes to us?

Friends, on this last day of the year, we remember Jesus as an infant who has been blessed and fussed over by two senior members of the community who gave his parents great joy. God was doing a new thing in the life of this child.

Let us cherish this story, and the way we greet and cherish all babies we meet. Let us also give thanks at what came of this baby’s life, Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Most of all, let us look forward to meeting him again in the new year, in many bodies that will challenge and bless us, and the ways in which we will greet and cherish him again. Amen.