

This is going to be either a really good sermon or a really bad sermon. Here's how we'll know. If you leave here and can see the perpetual problem God has to overcome in loving the world, then it was a good sermon.

We begin with a reminder. Two weeks ago, I said that the Virgin Mary matters to human life, because she was the biological bridge between two worlds. When she said to the angel, **“May it be to me as you have said,”** her little Jewish body became the bridge by which God in all His mystery crossed over into our world and made Himself accessible to us as Mary's Son, Jesus. Jesus said, **“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”** – John 14:7. To have seen Jesus or to read the eyewitness accounts of Jesus in the gospels is to see God under human conditions.

However, the human conditions under which God revealed Himself in the life of Jesus were decidedly Jewish. We fail to see just how Jewish they were, when we hurry past Luke 1 to the juicy parts in Luke 2 about Caesar Augustus, no room in the inn, swaddling clothes, angels, shepherds, and glory to God in the highest.

As a result, Luke 1 and the second half of Luke 2 seem like strangers. We have become a bit better acquainted with Luke one this month. We need to become a bit better acquainted with the second half of Luke 2 today. It will show us how thoroughly Jewish the human conditions were under which God revealed Himself in the life of Jesus. It will also set up the problem God has to overcome in loving the world.

Circumcision

Luke 2:21 puts us in a completely Jewish frame of mind. **On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.** “Why the eighth day?” you may ask. Look at Leviticus 12:1-3. **The Lord said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites: ‘A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days, just as she is unclean during her monthly period. On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised.’”**

Luke 2:22 alludes to Mary's ritual uncleanness. **When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him (took Jesus) to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.** Mary and Joseph were punctilious in their obedience to the Torah.

You see it in the sacrifices they made for her purification. Verse 24: They offered **a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”** Look back at the instructions for sacrifice in Leviticus 12:8: **If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons.** Mary and Joseph were too poor to afford a lamb, so in compliance with the Law of the Lord they offered the sacrifice they could afford.

Simeon and Anna

Verses 21-24 have placed us knee-deep in a Jewish way of life. The water rises more in verses 25-35. Luke presents us here with the eyewitness account of Simeon. Verse 25 describes him first as **righteous and devout.** Then it says: **He was waiting for the consolation of Israel.** Those poignant words seize and hold a hope that has burned in the soul of Jews for the past 2500 years. Simeon thought he had found it.

Verse 28: **Simeon took him (Jesus) into his arms and praised God saying: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”**

How was Simeon drawn to Joseph and Mary and their child on that particular day? Luke doesn't tell us, except to say in verses 26-27 that **it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ (the Lord's Messiah). Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms.**

In verse 32 Simeon called Jesus **a light . . . for glory to your people Israel.** That is sharply disputed, never more so than by most Jews. I believe that is the truth, but the dreadful treatment of Jews by Christians, especially in Europe, has dimmed that light.

Simeon also said something troubling to Mary about her son. Verses 34-35: **“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.”** How would you like to hear that about your son?

However poignant and troubling Simeon's words were, they were spoken predominantly about Jewish people and a suffering, Jewish Savior.

And finally, there was Anna. Verse 36: **There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.** I wish we knew what a prophetess like Anna did. How did she get to be known as a prophetess? What did the Jerusalem authorities think about her? Did they even know her? Luke is no help at all. He put her in his biography of Jesus for one reason. We'll get to it shortly.

Keep reading. **She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.** I think that means she was 84 when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the temple. Her age makes her habits of devotion even more remarkable. **She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.** All the regulars who went to the temple would know her. Any Annas in this congregation? The Delaware Valley is not a hospitable social climate for an Anna to emerge. But you never know. You never know.

By the way this was all very Jewish, maybe even extreme within Jewish religious culture. And then, like Simeon, in ways we don't know, she too was drawn to the young couple and their firstborn son. It's quite remarkable. Verse 38: **Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.**

Zechariah had called Jesus **a horn of salvation . . . salvation from our enemies.** Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. Anna is aware of temple regulars who along with her **were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem;** and she connected the eight-day-old child to those yearnings for a liberated Jerusalem that burned in the hearts of Jews as such hopes can burn only in the Middle East. How Jewish!

Translation

For hundreds of years God had focused His attention on that one Semitic tribe. He had elected them alone to be His people. Under the pressure of that relentless divine

attention, Israel had developed a subtle and extensive vocabulary with which to talk about God. Their history was dotted with memorable people and events, all of which reflected God's purpose and God's character. Custom and memory and experience stained the revelation of God Jewish through and through. He was the God of the Jews and of no one else. How could God who loved the whole world escape out of the Jewish house He had built for Himself and demonstrate His love in a way the whole world would understand?

That brings us to a mystery. God seems to paint Himself into a corner like that over and over. God does not just love Jews. He loves Eskimos and Algerians and Quechua Indians and Philipinos. And everywhere that people groups believe the gospel and begin to work the gospel into their habits and collective memories, God begins to look a lot like an Eskimo or an Algerian or a Quechua or a Philippino. The problem arises again: How does God who loves the whole world escape out of the ethnic house He has built for Himself and demonstrate His love in a way the whole world will understand?

It's not that the Eskimo or American, Brazilian, Chinese, or Congolese version of Christ is better than the others. That's the competitive way to think. It takes all the ethnic versions of Christ to give us a reasonably comprehensive picture of who Christ really is. A lovely Alfred Burt Christmas carol captures the emotion I'm trying to express.

Some children see Him lily white,
The baby Jesus born this night.
Some children see Him lily white,
With tresses soft and fair.

Some children see Him bronzed and brown,
The Lord of Heaven to earth come down.
Some children see Him bronzed and brown,
With dark and heavy hair.

Some children see Him almond-eyed,
The Savior whom we kneel beside.
Some children see Him almond-eyed,
With skin of yellow hue.

Some children see Him dark as they,
Sweet Mary's Son to whom we pray.
Some children see Him dark as they,
And, ah! They love Him too.

O lay aside each earthly thing
And with thy heart as offering
Come worship now the infant King.
'Tis love that's born tonight.

Getting Personal

Now, let's see the problem God has to overcome up close. How can God who loves the whole world escape out of the house He has built for Himself in Brandywine Valley Baptist Church (BVBC) and demonstrate His love in a way the whole world can

understand? The answer is the same, whether it is His Jewish, Kenyan, or Korean house, or His Baptist congregation on Mount Lebanon Road. God irritates the house He has built for Himself.

He irritates it with something outside the Church, like persecution, and He irritates it with something inside the Church, like a scandal or a doctrinal dispute. Without divine irritations BVBC will become stagnant, unable to express God's determination to love the whole world. Stagnant churches avoid conflict. Stagnant churches avoid change. The bumper sticker I saw on I-95 expresses the soul of a stagnant church: "I am happy with exactly who I am." I'd like to offer five tips on how to make the most of the irritants God is using to escape out of the house He has built for Himself in BVBC.

1. Think of yourself as the new American minority. We are witnessing the cultural rejection of Christianity. We are feeling the cultural rejection of Christianity. The effort to eradicate Christianity from public life, which began in the '50s is succeeding and is becoming oppressive. This is the irritant from outside the Church. There is no political solution. The sooner we think like a minority, the better we face the opposition.

2. If you are a white Christian, treat people of color in this congregation as equals. Let's eradicate any residual racism we may have. A key to doing that is to stop feeling "white guilt." It's debilitating. It promotes resentment toward people of color. It's unnecessary. If you offend a person of color, confess it to God, apologize to the person, and get on with building a relationship of mutual respect. And don't run.

3. If you are a Christian of color, tell white Christians in this congregation what you are thinking. I once flew to Cincinnati with a black pastor I knew. We talked about race the whole trip. He knew I had grown up in the Old South. He wanted to know how I handled the Civil Rights Movement. If 10 million blacks and 10 million whites had a few 2-hour conversations like that, we would begin to undo our dreadful racial divide. He made it possible by telling me what he was thinking. Do the same, and don't run.

4. If you hold firmly to biblical beliefs and values, as this church does, don't alienate people who disagree with you by your attitude. You may discover that someone here holds beliefs and values that are radically different from yours. Have the courage to be firm and the grace to be kind. That's our ticket to the future. And don't run.

5. If you've come to BVBC and you like what you see, but you feel out of place because you disagree with some of its biblical beliefs and values, try to understand why the church believes as it does. We believe as we do, because we believe the Bible is the authority for what we believe and the way we live. Plenty of people here are educated in the faith enough to connect our beliefs and values to the Bible in a responsible way. And don't run.

God is irritating the house He has built for Himself. It is happening on a global scale; it is happening here. We feel the irritants from outside. The culture that once gave Protestant Christianity a privileged place in American life is now rejecting Christ. People we like sit with us in worship or in a class or small group and shock us with views that seem unbiblical. Race is not theory. You may sit next to a black, Hispanic, or Asian from anywhere in the world. We can view this as a threat, or we can see the hand of God breaking out of the house He has built for Himself in order to demonstrate His love for the whole world. I accept the pain and joy brought about by the divine irritants. And you?