**“The Pageant Continues”**

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Texts: *Isaiah 61:10-62:3* and *Luke 2:22-40*

Well, the pageants are over…the angel wings and sheep hats are safely stored away waiting for next year. We’ve told the story…the shepherds, the angels, the wise men hurried to find their place at the manger. And now it’s done. At home, the wrapping paper has been returned to the closet, the leftovers long gone from the fridge, and now we’re eyeing those trees. Christmas lights are giving way to fireworks…it’s time to celebrate a new year and then get back to ordinary things.

But wait. Luke invites us to linger a moment longer in his gospel story. Christmas isn’t over yet. There’s another act in this play. This one is less flashy, no angels, no blinking star in the sky. It happens in the middle of the ordinary. Luke knows there’s value in watching this tiny baby as he goes into a world like ours, in seeing him grow like we do, in savoring the gift of the incarnation.

The last scene in the pageant ended at verse 20. The stable is empty, save for the mother, father, and baby. I remember this moment in the birth of my own children. The doctors are gone, the relatives are gone, everyone’s exhausted. With the excitement past, the time has come to tend to the ordinary parts of life. So, here we find Jesus, just a month old. He has, as is the custom of his faith, been circumcised and named, which Luke relates in a single verse.

Now it is time for the family to go to Jerusalem. It’s time for the purification ritual at the temple. They go from Bethlehem where they had gone to be registered, according to the law of Caesar, and travel to Jerusalem, to follow the law according to the Torah. They are a devout Jewish couple living under the rule of the empire, raising their son according to their faith and trying to survive in a system that is not always fair. They are not, perhaps, much different than any of us.

Mary and Joseph come to the temple with the baby. They are unremarkable by the standards of the day. They know that that the baby they carry is special. But he doesn’t glow. He doesn’t wear a crown. It is a secret not yet known except to the insiders at the manger. And the parents are dressed in simple clothing. They don’t have enough money for anything more. They don’t even have enough money to bring a proper sacrifice to the temple…they bring the offering of the poor, just two turtledoves, as opposed to the usual lamb. One wouldn’t expect them to be noticed at all.

But when the Holy Family enters the temple, they are greeted by Simeon. Simeon is not young and probably not poor. He lives in Jerusalem and is a good temple-goer. He’s seen struggle and anguish for the people of Israel. And he has been doing his part to make the world a better place, doing God’s work in the world. He wants to rest, his body is tired. But he’s waiting for a comforter for his people. He can’t be at peace until he sees this through. Something compelled him to come to the temple on this day, not an angel, just a nudging of the spirit. As he’s waiting, in walks this poor, tired, young family with a baby. He doesn’t know them, but he takes the baby in his hands and thanks God. He confirms for the parents what the angels had said and blesses the baby. Now he can rest knowing that the future is in good hands. But how did he know?

Anna comes next. She, too, is older, in her eighties. She lives in the temple, never leaving and praying without ceasing. She carries in her bones the story of widowhood and childlessness. Seeing the baby, she recognizes him and jumps into action. She doesn’t handle the baby and encourage the parents, but instead turns to the people in the temple and tells them of the good news that this baby brings. Nothing will keep her from praise. How did she know?

Then, according to the scriptures, Mary and Joseph simply go home, having completed all the necessary procedures. But I can only imagine the wonder they carry from this encounter in the temple.

I wonder too. The text is full of questions. Reading with wonder and poking at the story, looking under the edges and behind the words, entering into holy conversation with the text and characters, I wonder.

I wonder where we are in this story?

Luke brings together a multitude of voices. Young and old, man and woman, rich and poor, powerful and downtrodden, parent and widow, insider and outsider. Every spectrum is brought into community around this tiny infant. Everyone has their own unique way of encountering Christ. And every voice, every body, every person adds a dimension to what we know about God.

I wonder who could be left out and the story remain the same?

When we do the instant pageant, there’s always a chance that there is character no one will pick. And it always makes me wonder. How does the story unravel when one person is left out?

Could we leave out the child? Certainly not. Even in this story, where Jesus is not actually doing anything really. His only gift is his presence, the hope he offers in his mere existence. In coming into the world as a child, God confirms the goodness of children, of growing, of humanity.

Could we leave out Simeon, who having seen the presence of God, takes a backseat? No, because he offers words of confirmation to Mary. Even with no angel announcing the child, he recognizes the miracle. And there a is lesson in his touch, his willingness to hold what is new in the hands of what is old and know that being is enough.

What about Anna? The text doesn’t even take time to record her words. Or maybe it doesn’t record them because there wasn’t enough space to contain it…Anna’s gift is in her witness – joyfully telling the world about the hope held in the tiny person.

Then there’s Mary and Joseph, a poor family with not much to offer. But they were not chosen by accident. This is the family Jesus is born into. In a world where power belongs to the wealthy and riches are counted as blessings, perhaps it would behoove us to remember that God-with-us came into poverty and knows what it means to just scrape by. God values those who the world turns from and comes among them as he overturns the world.

So if none can be left out, I wonder who are we challenged to welcome in our holy spaces to complete our part of the story?

When I work with older adults, they often tell me about the spaces they no longer fit in because of aging bodies. They mourn the acts of discipleship that are no longer easy or maybe even impossible. And while it is sure that the scriptures are full of active discipleship, this story points out that holding someone and blessing and sharing stories is also action. Each person, from the youngest to the oldest, in this text is asked to offer no more than what they have to give. And that gift is just what is needed. So we learn to value what we can do instead of mourning what we can’t.

And what about the rich and the poor? So often in mission we focus on fixing things without listening to the stories of our neighbors to see how we could be more partners and less saviors in our community. This is the struggle with the Matthew 25 initiative – it’s not just about putting a bandaid on it, but truly dismantling the things that divide us so God can do God’s work in community. Making space means asking who’s being excluded and what special gifts do they offer and how can we make space for them to share it?

And it’s no mistake that Luke balances the voices of men and women throughout this nativity story… Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, and now Simeon and Anna…they each have a voice and an experience. And experience is not limited to their gender. They take turns in the role of revelation and prophesy. So we learn now to lift up voices across the spectrum of gender.

No, as is always the case in the story of the people of God, this story is not complete unless everyone is there. This is a lesson for the church. The church, at its best, mirrors this story. We are all welcome and needed here. We learn from the inquisitiveness and fearless wonder of the children, the youth offer new perspectives as they grow in a changing world, the elders share their wisdom from years of experience and tradition. We are enriched in a community where gifts are varied and valued.

I wonder where you have encountered the baby?

Imagine if we approached every young family with the open wonder that Simeon and Anna did…if we saw the Christ Child in every child. Believing that every child deserves the right to flourish despite the circumstances they were born into because every child carries a reflection of the divine spurs us to action to end poverty, to dismantle racism, to honor diversity, to make schools and communities places of equity, to create spaces of justice wherever we are.

And imagine if we kept our eyes open to see the Christ Child in every child of God, their worth in their createdness, not in what they look like or what they can do. Anna and Simeon didn’t have the benefit of angels in the sky, just the quiet nudging of the Spirit that kept their eyes open and their hearts wondering in the midst of ordinary living. Sometimes it’s just a glimpse of true grace and love…sometimes it’s the quiet nudging that pushes us to be in the place where our lives are changed by another…sometimes it’s in the words of confirmation of what we have heard in our hearts in the voice of a stranger. The nativity story opens us up to surprising and quiet ways that we meet God who is alive in this world in a million ordinary moments.

And I wonder, having heard this gospel story, how will your life be changed for kindom living?

How will you respond to your encounter with the divine today?

As we go from this place, don’t be in such a hurry to pack away the Christmas story. Marvel in its inclusiveness and expansiveness. Recognize the value God puts on growth and life…every age and stage of it. And look for the Christ child, expecting to be surprised and filled with hope. Amen.