

December 28, 2008  
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Luke 2: 22-40

And so, they take him to the temple. Raised as we are, on so much Hollywood depiction of the Bible, and that combined with our own tendency to do what Hollywood does, to glamorize that which is dear to us, we might really miss this story. I mean, mention the temple in Jerusalem and this sort of glory mechanism kicks in. I mean we know that it was an architectural marvel, one of the wonders of the ancient world. It's difficult to imagine its sheer size! It could hold 80-100,000 people. Its doors were 80 feet high and made of Corinthian bronze. It took 200 men to open them and close them each morning and evening.

I mean that's impressive and we are impressed. Even going there today, we are impressed by the archeological ruins. So, what we miss is that the temple was not really an ideal or a vision, although it had become the symbol of all of Israel's nationalistic hopes, but rather it was, in fact, the focus of the daily cultic routine. It was the place where sacrifice was offered. And to get a feel for that we need to imagine a slaughterhouse. So, can you smell the burning flesh, coming from the altar? Can you feel the panic of the livestock, as they smell death? That's what was really going on. Literal scapegoating... literal sacrificing of one thing for their own shortcomings.

So, you see, it's into all of that, that two separate elderly people encounter a young couple carrying a baby. It's into all of that that Jesus comes. And Simeon, led by the Holy Spirit, gets it. Maybe it was just that he'd lived long enough to have gained some wisdom about life. He gets it. He knows that Israel's true hope, that his own deepest hopes, could not be wrapped up in anything that engendered an "us" versus "them" mentality, which is precisely what all the cultic routine of the temple did. You know, this is what we do, we sacrifice these animals to God, and that appeases God, and covers our sins and shortcomings, and so *we're* alright.

We've done what we need to do. We're alright, as opposed to everybody else who hasn't: Gentiles, the poor who couldn't afford to participate, and prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors and any other sinners who because of their lifestyles couldn't be let anywhere near the temple. Simeon gets it. He's been waiting all these years for the consolation of Israel, but he understands that it doesn't come at the expense of others. Says Simeon, praising God, "for my eyes have seen your 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." Israel's true hope wasn't, and couldn't be for "us" as opposed to "them." And that's why Simeon knew that this child who was God's messiah would be opposed, and would be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel. And we know who was elevated by Jesus: the poor, the outcasts, sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans and lepers.

You see, when you mess with "us" and "them" thinking, you're really messing with things, and you will be opposed. If we have heard the meaning of this child's birth at Christmas we know that our saving hope is not and will not ever be anything that involves "us" versus "them." It is precisely that, this sacrificial, scapegoating tendency in us and in human cultures and religions that we need saving and redeeming from, isn't it?! Who will deliver us from this body of death that we keep doing over and over so that we can be free to live and rejoice in life together with each other in all God's created diversity?

We've seen it again over the last week or so in all the controversy over President-elect Obama's asking of Rick Warren to give the invocation at the inauguration, haven't we? There are those on the religious right who are upset at Rick Warren for accepting the invitation, because they want to scapegoat Mr. Obama and democrats and anyone else who doesn't think like them on all the issues. And then there are those on the far left who are upset at President-elect Obama

for asking Warren, because they want to scapegoat Rick Warren and all those on the religious right who don't think like them on all the issues. And so it goes. And just like with the temple in Jerusalem, whether it be a religious agenda, or some other secular agenda, what it actually is, is a cultural scapegoating mechanism that attempts to say "me and my group are okay, but you're not, you're unacceptable."

Who will deliver us from this body of death? Our salvation is not and will never be anything that involves "us" versus "them." That's what we need saving from. And Simeon understood. And Anna understood. Maybe it's the wisdom that comes with age, or the wisdom that comes with deeply hoping over the years, or the wisdom that comes from years of prayer and fasting. They understood. And so, listen to Simeon when he encounters this young couple and their baby in the temple. He blesses them and he says to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." Not even Mary will escape being "called out" as it were, by Jesus. It's the whole gospel, in miniature, laid out before us right there in those words, isn't it?

Jesus ministry and teachings of forgiveness and mercy and inclusion, and so, his calling out of all who thought they were somehow the righteous, or the favored. And, finally their killing him for that. It's no accident that Luke wants to have this pronouncement by Simeon take place in the Temple, in the midst of all the slaughtering of animals. See everyone knew that the temple priesthood was controlled by four families in Jerusalem, the house of Annas supplying seven priests from Herod to the downfall of Jerusalem. And everyone knew also, that the house of Annas had a monopoly on the 'meat market' located in the temple vicinity. It was all about the economics of religion. It was a booming business. Luke knew that Jesus had called them out. And they showed themselves. And says Simeon, that *is* the hope he had been waiting for so long! That *is* the consolation of Israel!

We *need* to be called out! Our hope is in the one who calls us out. We need to be called out, don't we? See, understand, this is not about replacing Judaism with Christianity. It's not about how animal sacrifice didn't work, but the sacrifice of Christ did. It's the reversal of the whole idea that God demands sacrifice, that God demands scapegoating. It's *we* who demand sacrifice, and Christ offers himself up to us in order to *end* our demand for sacrifice, in order to *stop* our scapegoating. As Simeon knew, what's revealed in this one, are *our* inner thoughts! What's revealed is that we, with our scapegoating, have murdered God. And what's revealed in the resurrection is that God doesn't let even *that* stop him from loving us.

That's why being called out is our hope! It *is* what can deliver us, save us from our body of death...for life together. So, it's not the end of Judaism, replacing it with Christianity. It's the "end" of religion as something that must ever be defended. It's the "end" of religion as something that ever sets up an "us" and "them" dichotomy, whether that's Christian religion, or Jewish religion, or Muslim religion, or Buddhist religion, or enlightenment philosophy, or secular humanism. The coming of this One, whose birth we celebrate, is our hope because his coming reveals our system of scapegoating as crucifying Christ. His coming among us calls us out.

Thanks be to God! Thanks be to God the wholeness of Christ, the promise of the Kingdom is for everyone, even for us! Thanks be to God, that like the one who comes as a baby, there is still more growing for us to do, that salvation is never as finished as any of our rituals might lead us to think. Thanks be to God instead for fullness of life ready to grow and grow. Merry Christmas.