

Luke 2:22-40 (ESV)

### **Jesus Presented at the Temple**

<sup>22</sup> And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) <sup>24</sup> and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” <sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. <sup>26</sup> And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. <sup>27</sup> And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, <sup>28</sup> he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

<sup>29</sup> “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
according to your word;

<sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation

<sup>31</sup> that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and for glory to your people Israel.”

<sup>33</sup> And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. <sup>34</sup> And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed <sup>35</sup> (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

<sup>36</sup> And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, <sup>37</sup> and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

### **The Return to Nazareth**

<sup>39</sup> And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. <sup>40</sup> And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

## Three Layers of Protection

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: *Luke 2:22-40*

It's the new year. It's hard to believe that it's already January 2006. But it's true. Here we are. It's January again. The New England Patriots are in the playoffs again. Maybe, just maybe, they can win a record-breaking three Super Bowls in a row. Wouldn't that be something?

Some of you sports enthusiasts have no doubt recognized that my sermon title today is connected to the Patriots. You've seen the Visa ad in which Tom Brady's offensive linemen are compared to the five layers of security protection that Visa provides its customers. Well, this morning, I want to talk about the three layers of family protection the Gospel provides for us. Three layers with which God honors the idea of family, three layers that ultimately go far beyond our usual thinking of families, and three layers that finally give us our marching orders as faithful people of God.

So here we are at the new year. Here we are, a new church as of today, North Prospect Union United Church of Christ. It's a good time to reflect about what God has done for us and what God wants for us and of us.

We read in the very beginning of the Bible that we are part of a loving creation that God pronounced good at every step. Beyond that, we are told that we are created in God's image, that we have the holy within our DNA, that we have a deep and abiding connection with God. And though it turned out to be a complicated matter almost from the beginning, God sanctified our being together in families. God made Adam, and then a companion, Eve, and thus began the first family. Made in God's image. Then God reversed the direction, making God like us. God honored human beings and human family in the birth of Jesus, which we celebrate in this season of Christmas. In the incarnation, God affirms that not only are we made in the divine image, but also the divine has taken on human form. Jesus was born a babe in a manger, grew to be a man, and lost his life for holding fast to his principles. In Jesus, God truly and literally became our brother.

I feel the need to take a momentary diversion, a slight side-bar, and excursus, if you will. Sometimes the idea of family that people derive from the book of Genesis, from the creation story, is that God meant for families to be of one kind only. Focus on the Family and other groups chant, "It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve." It's a great sound-bite. But that's about all it is. One doesn't have to look very hard at the birth of Jesus to recognize that God doesn't hold up the usual and the humanly acceptable as the standard. Mary is found to be with child outside of marriage. Her fiancé Joseph knows he's not the father and plans to break off the engagement until he hears an amazing story from an angel in a dream. The couple plods to Bethlehem and has the baby in a stable. And all the while ringing in Mary's ears are the words of prediction she uttered months before, "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has

sent empty away.” It’s hard to reconcile who Jesus was with who many of his followers today want to make him into. If there is one thing that is clear about the Gospel it is that it turns our conventional thinking and standards on their ear. And yet in age after age people have looked to it to prop up their own biases and norms. If the story were to be written today, at whose house do you think Jesus would have had dinner, Adam and Eve’s, or Adam and Steve’s.

Okay, sidebar over. Back to the first layer of family protection. In the creation and in the incarnation God honors and sanctifies human being and human family. What gladness there is to find that our being and our relationships, ourselves and the relationships with the people we hold dearest are part of what God has made and part of what God has become. It is a wonderful thing.

I have given one caution, however, about defining the composition of human being and human families too narrowly. When we do, we begin to turn the holiness into something quite unholy.

There is another narrowness that Jesus worries about, too. That is the narrowness of taking our biological families, for all their holiness, as the end all and be all. There is perhaps no more stunning story in all the Gospels that when Jesus is teaching and his mother and brothers come to see him. They can’t get through the crowd. Finally some one relays the message, “Your mother and your brothers are outside desiring to see you.” Rather than jumping up and running outside to embrace them, Jesus responds, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” In what appears to be a rude and disrespectful act, Jesus is trying to teach his hearers that the family that forms around the commitment to the Gospel is ultimately more important than the biological family.

We gather as a church family, a family of faith. Indeed, today, we are making a new beginning as a family of faith. And Jesus wants to tell us that the family ties of this family are holy, and finally even more significant than those of our biological families. In the end, Jesus wasn’t disrespecting blood families. But they aren’t the end of the story.

We are all aware that, unfortunately, many biological families are great disappointments and frequently even toxic environments. In some families there is a history of abuse. Some families are fractured over persistent disputes and misunderstandings. Some families are torn apart by divorces and other separations. For many people the dream of a spouse and children is a dream that has never come true. And for many others, it is not their dream at all. Jesus surveyed the people around him, and he noticed that for many of them biological families did not exist or were not a haven, and he wanted them all to know that in the family of faith, in the family of those bound by their commitment to the Gospel, in the family of those who hear and do the word of God together is found a holy family.

Jesus opened his arms widely enough to make the community of faith a family. It’s fair to say that in doing so Jesus was making a second point as well. Jesus wanted people to hear that hearing and doing the word of God also trumped blood family ties. Sometimes in blood families there is great pressure to hide wrongdoing, to protect blood ties. There was a woman whose husband regularly beat her. And she had been told and she came to believe that it would be wrong to take the matter outside the family, to leave her husband or go to the police. She was told that God requires that we suffer whatever sacrifice is necessary to preserve the family, because God ordains the sanctity of marriage and family. She was told that it would be a sin to do anything about her situation. But over time the woman came to hear a different voice from

God, a voice that said, “My family are those who hear the word of God and do it.” In her church family she learned the kind of relationships that God truly sanctifies. The church family is a second layer of what God honors, and for some it is literally a layer of protection.

As important as the family of faith is, we are not yet done widening the net. In our world today it is all too obvious that families of faith can function in many of the detrimental ways that biological families do. Within families of faith we know that much abuse has been perpetrated, often by those leaders who are charged to be God’s ordained emissaries of protection. The results are devastating. Whether it be in the home or in the church, the family is portrayed as a protective environment. The institution conveys an ambience of trust. And that trust makes it all the more easy for perpetrators to convince the vulnerable that their abuse is acceptable. In either family the litmus is this, always this: “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” Within families of faith, just as within families at home, Jesus gives us a mechanism for getting out from under those who distort and pervert that which was meant to be holy.

There is another concern about families of faith. Our scripture this morning points us to it. When Jesus was brought to the Temple for circumcision there was there a righteous and devout man named Simeon. Simeon was an old man, but he had been told that he would not die until he had seen God’s Christ. When he looked upon Jesus, Simeon knew that he was the one. But look at what he said: “My eyes have seen your salvation <sup>31</sup> that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

This is parallel to the story of Jesus’ mother and brothers. At the very moment that Simeon recognizes Jesus as the Christ, the one for whom Israel had waited, he says, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” Right when we expect an announcement of the future victorious leader for Israel, we are told that Jesus won’t just be for the glory of Israel, but a light for the rest of the world.

At a moment when we expect the family of Israel’s faith to take the foreground, we find the notion of family extended beyond the old confines, indeed, to the world itself.

In John Steineck’s classic Novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, we meet the Joad family of Oklahoma. It is the great depression made worse in Oklahoma by the drought that produced the great dust bowl. The Joads finally are forced to leave their home. They are lured by tattered flyers to the promised land of jobs and plenty in California. Destitute, the trip grinds them and many others into the ground. But along the way something rather extraordinary happens. As they strive to exist, their sense of greater interdependency grows. At one point Mam Joad expresses it this way, “Use’ta be the fambly was fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do.” One commentator says that the novel tells us, “A loss of immediate family seems to be a prerequisite to understanding one’s place as part of a global community in which all persons are a part of one great soul.” Whether it requires the loss of immediate family or not, I am uncertain. But what does seem clear is that in the end the immediate family, and the family of religion and nation, must lose their blinding grip on the human imagination so that we may recognize what Simeon recognized, the sanctity of the whole human family.

What a message for our world this is! Look at us now. Look at us today. Look at us in the news around the globe. One family of faith pitted against another. And even when the

conflict isn't described as one religion against another, religion is almost always taken as the authority for it. Our president calls out, "God bless America," and has said explicitly that he has looked to God for his direction in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Muslim terrorists exclaim, "Allah Akbar, God is the greatest, when they explode their violence. Israel is persuaded by its claim to the Holy Land. Palestinian Christians look to their Christianity for the authority to bomb Israelis. And so it goes from Darfur to Indonesia, from the Middle East to America.

Is this what Simeon saw? Is this what he meant when he said of Jesus, "a light to the Gentiles, and glory to your people Israel?" Surely it was not. Just before the Iraq war, when our attack was inevitable, the Lutheran minister Paul Neuchterlain placed a simple sign on his front lawn. It said, "I have family in Iraq." Now there aren't many Lutherans in Iraq. And Neuchterlain has no blood kin there, either. But he, like all of us, has family there.

Simeon was right, of course. He saw in the birth of Jesus a third layer of protection, a third layer of sanctity. He saw the sanctity of the whole human family.

Look. Look in the mirror at your holiness. Look at the babe brought to us in our celebration of Christmastide. Look at the possibilities of hearing and doing God's word that enlarge our vision. Look at our global village. Look. Do you see? Do you see what Simeon saw? A light for the world? Do you see it? There it is. A light for the world. A light for the whole human family. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The idea for three levels of family was taken from a reference to a sermon that Paul Neuchterlein mentioned on his website.