

Scripture Luke 2:22-40

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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 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.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

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Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother 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.” There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him

Let's Start at the Very Beginning (A Very Good Place to Start)

In case you have not yet noticed it, today's date is 123123. 12/31/23. 123123. That's how we begin, as simply as 123, abc, do re mi. Jesus' life should have begun simply – a home birth, family around, a warm fire and some lullabys sung by mom and dad. But he was born away from home, in a barn, probably cold, and the only singing would have been bleating, mooing and the occasional snort. That was one end of the spectrum.

The other end of the spectrum is in our lesson today, where the expectations for this baby's life are set – and they are set HIGH! No coochy coos here – instead, “You, baby boy, are God's salvation, a revelation to Gentiles, and the reason that many will rise and fall in this nation. And it will all make your heart break.”

What was to be a bright, shiny beginning for Mary, Joseph, and their baby, was an onus beyond their imagining. Being chosen by God was an auspicious beginning, but it was also a sign of endings.

Isn't that the way it always is? Starting something new is simultaneously a time of ending. When I meet with couples before they get married, we talk about what it means to be engaged. The engagement is not a moment, but a process of engaging with each other, with each other's families, friends, and colleagues, and engaging more deeply with new patterns as an “us” rather than “you” and “me.” Engaging fully with your partner means disengaging from other people and things in your life. Perhaps there is a need for an over-worker to disengage from the office a bit earlier to help the new dad at home; or for an escapist to disengage from spending 3 hours on computer games every night in order to talk and listen to each other; or for an extrovert to disengage from frequent large gatherings in favor of a quiet evening with the introverted partner.

Mary and Joseph were disengaging their hopes and expectations with every passing day. Early pregnancy – no big wedding. Spiritual pronouncements – no predictable life of carpentry ahead. Prophets in the temple setting their son apart for the redemption of Israel – no home life insulated from the world. These parents were going to have to assure Jesus was educated, affable, and had every opportunity to develop his spiritual well-being. The future they were embarking on was nowhere near what they had originally planned.

Whether beginning a relationship or a family life, or a new year in the life of a congregation, the beginnings hold endings, disengagement, and therefore, grief. It's true – even the smallest of changes, like remembering to

write 2024 instead of 2023 is a moment of grief: Where did the year go? Am I forgetting other things, too? What about all the things I thought I would do last year that I didn't do? These are the little griefs.

We are familiar with the larger griefs, too – maybe an empty nest, the loss of a spouse, a change in one's health, divorce or discord at home, retirement, moving... All these things trigger spiritual, physical and emotional responses. In 2023 we experienced the absence of our pastor. This was not the expectation we had for this year. We held an image of pastoral consistency up front that did not come to pass. This triggers a grief response. Maybe you experienced some sleeplessness, stomach pain or overeating – those are some physical responses. Maybe you question where God is during this time of the investigation, or you feel Holy Spirit particularly close to you. These are some spiritual responses to grief. And maybe you have been anxious, worried or angry – emotional responses to grief.

Whether you have articulated a complaint or a word of support during these past three months, you are in the process of grieving. This is compounded by the fact that we do not have a lot of information to go on, so there aren't a lot of places for the grief to land. The tricky part about grief is that even if there's no place for it to go, it's going to come out anyway. The stomachache, spiritual emptiness, or anger, for example, will spill over into other areas of our lives. I'd like to teach you my entire course on Grief and Loss, but I think I'll cut to the chase.

My point in bringing this up today, is that this is all to be expected. It is not unusual to feel, believe or experience grief in a situation like ours... but the truth is that each of us is unique in how we live with grief. Simply because I grieve by crying doesn't mean that I need to encourage everyone else to cry! Likewise, if someone else is expressing anger, that doesn't mean you have to tag in to that emotion to make your grief legitimate. We can be okay with the fact that we are all dealing with the same situation in our own way, and there is no right or wrong way of doing it.

I wish we had a bit more of the story of Mary and Joseph to guide us. I wish we knew in more detail how they dealt with the grief of losing the original dream they had for their family. What little we DO know, tells us they relied on their religious and cultural rituals for a sense of grounding to deal with the celestial expectations of birthing the savior of the world. They went to the temple to dedicate their child. We know they also went to Jerusalem on pilgrimage when Jesus was about 12 – probably for his bar mitvah. The things in our lives that are predictable, like coming to worship, singing a hymn,

partaking in communion, and (of course) eating a donut, can be anchors that keep us from spiraling out and away from each other.

To be honest, even if we weren't going through a common grief-filled time in our congregation, the fact is that each of us is grieving some loss every day of our lives. When you and I know that someone is grieving after a particularly difficult loss, we treat them with extra kindness and care. We give them a break and extra understanding. We forgive more easily. Each person in this room is carrying a loss that you may or may not know about. Each brother and sister in Christ, each person on the street, each stranger we encounter – all of us need to be treated more kindly and care-fully, because we are grieving.

When we acknowledge our common grief, we can see the promise of the new year coming. From our common human experience we can imagine a hopeful future. Let's start at the very beginning with our rituals. We'll sing a Christmas carol of the season, and come together at the table of Christ.

Amen.