

According to the Law

We have heard the story of Jesus' birth so many times, it is so familiar to us that I imagine that as I was reading it on Christmas Eve as part of the Lessons and Carols Service, if I had been reading the King James translation of the scripture, no one who was here would have needed a Bible opened to Luke to have known what words would have been said next. Their phrases have been written not only into the verses of the hymns, but also into our hearts. And although we have four gospel accounts of Jesus' life, there is actually only one account which has a narration which tells us of a birth in a manger, so on Christmas Eve we always read from Luke's account. Matthew and Luke both place the birth in Bethlehem, but while Luke tells us that lowly shepherds were immediately told of this wondrous event, it is Matthew that tells us of the visit of the Magi who came and worshiped this child that the heavens proclaimed would be the king of the Jews. Our image of the nativity scene often places the Magi there on that same night, but the Magi arrived in Palestine much later. These men arrived actually about two years after the birth of Jesus. It is believed they traveled a great distance across the Syrian desert and after making a brief stop in Jerusalem which had disastrous results recorded as the massacre of the infants by King Herod, they journeyed on the nine miles that it took to reach Bethlehem and offered gifts and worshiped the toddler they found. This visit of the Magi is marked on our church calendar on January 6th and is celebrated as Epiphany. So it is that we often turn our attention from Luke's gospel to Matthew's on this first Sunday after Christmas to remember this visit. By making this change we focus on God's announcement of this initiative to bring about humanity's redemption to the whole world—the total inclusiveness of into this activity of God—the shepherds who represent the lowliest of the low there in Palestine and the Magi so far away—who are seen as people never before included in God care. And we do need to keep in mind that God's love has always been more inclusive than we often want to recognize. But this morning I have chosen to linger awhile longer with Luke's gospel account and the things that Luke wants to tell us about the early days of Jesus' infancy. The gospel accounts aren't really biographical in the sense that we understand biographies. We view biographies as narratives that give details of a person's life pretty much from cradle to grave, so that we can know all about the person. The details that we have about Jesus' early life are rather sparse and are not really intended to tell us the things that we normally seek to learn from a biography. The writers of the gospels are telling us things which were preserved that made theological points about who Jesus is. The passage we have before us this morning makes it very clear that although God was doing something very special through Jesus, that this very special something was a continuation—a fulfillment of what God has been about since creation. Jesus represents the salvation for humanity brought to Israel and the nations. Jesus is the Messiah through the role of the Holy Spirit and is the fulfillment of prophecy revealed to Israel. All this is possible because Jesus was born into a Jewish family that faithfully observed the Law of Moses under a covenant made long before Jesus' birth. Our passage for this morning begins with Luke 21: After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. Almost immediately after the heavenly hosts have disappeared into heaven and the shepherds have returned to their flocks in verse 20, we are in the everyday world of Jewish ritual purity. Mary and Joseph attend to the details of being faithful Jews who observe God's law, not only in

the customary ritual act of circumcision but they are obedient even to the name the angel told them was chosen by God for this child. Circumcision was established with the covenant made between God and Abraham; it was confirmed by Moses at Sinai when the Law was given. But Luke's doesn't stop there with connections between what has been previously revealed about obedience and what Mary and Joseph now do. In today's passage, we have four statements that the actions taken by Mary and Joseph in this period of about six weeks after Jesus' birth were done according to the Law of Moses or the Law of the Lord. Luke continues by describing that Mary went to Jerusalem to the Temple to be purified, a ritual found in Leviticus. Jesus is also taken to the Temple and presented to the Lord according to traditions found in Exodus and in Numbers. At this presentation a sacrifice is offered which aligns this family with the poor; "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." So within a very brief period after his birth there are ample indications that Jesus has been born a Jew among Jews and is under the Law of Moses—and is being raised by faithful parents according to the Law. This action of God to intervene in the history of humanity—to dwell among us—not taking a position of power, but as an infant; not entering the world to thrash evildoers or crush the Roman oppressors, but to elicit love and nurture tenderness among us; and to do it while experiencing poverty and hardship and enduring suffering is a story of amazing grace and love. Yet that story is firmly rooted in the history of God's relationship with humanity as told through the people of Israel from the beginning which is why Luke tells us these details about the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph and why their actions in those days after Jesus' birth were according to the Law. They were faithful servants of the Lord. It is the connection to this covenant which reveals the depth of God's faithfulness to humanity. Mary and Joseph are faithful and through them God reveals an amazing story of grace which encompasses the law and redeems those who live according to the law. Our passage not only tells us about Mary and Joseph's compliance with the Law of the Lord, but during their visit to the Temple Luke tells us about two other witnesses to the specialness of this child. We have the stories of Simeon and Anna, both Jewish and regular attendees at the Temple. As Mary and Joseph present Jesus for the ceremony it was evidently interrupted by an old man named Simeon. Luke describes Simeon as a righteous and devout man to whom the Holy Spirit had revealed that he would live to see the Messiah who would rescue Israel. On this day, guided by the Spirit, Simeon comes into the Temple, sees Jesus, takes him into his arms and announces: "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." Luke then tells us that Mary and Joseph were amazed at what Simeon said about Jesus. At first glance you might think they would not find this nearly as amazing as what the shepherds had revealed. Right, I mean, I think even hearing about an Angel appearing with the glory of the Lord shining around it followed by a heavenly host singing would seem more impressive than a devout old man announcing that the sight of my child fulfilled what had been promised by the Holy Spirit to him. But then, think a little about this scene. Mary and Joseph are fulfilling all these things according to the Law...Jewish Law. And Simeon tells them Jesus is the salvation prepared for all peoples, a revelation to the Gentiles! The word translated here as amazing also implies confusion. It seems reasonable to assume that Mary and Joseph, who are so obedient according to the Laws of Moses would find this pronouncement about their special child, declared to be holy and special to God, the one to redeem Israel was also going to

bring salvations to gentiles. And as if that weren't enough, Simeon adds this tidbit, "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel 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 exactly a cheerful thought to brighten your day with. This child is the Messiah, but will not be universally accepted. In literature this is called foreshadowing. Notice that when Simeon utters his prophetic words about Jesus' destiny, the usual word order is reversed. We usually speak of something rising and then falling, the rise and fall of a career, the rise and fall of a fad, etc. But with Jesus it is to be a fall and then rise. As if that encounter wasn't enough, before Mary and Joseph got out of the Temple, a prophetess by the name of Anna who lived at the Temple began to speak about Jesus praising God for the redemption of Jerusalem coming through this child. Our passage ends with this family leaving Jerusalem, having finished everything required by the Law of the Lord. Verse 40 concludes: The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him. Unlike the visit of the shepherds and the things they said during their visit, we are not told that Mary treasured Simeon's words nor that she pondered the things that Anna said in her praise of God for sending Jesus. Instead after doing everything that was required according to the Law, these parents of this special child simply went home and went about living faithful lives. God's plan was in motion. The words of Simeon proved to be true, some recognized Jesus; some rejected him. That is still the truth today. But through this child all the world was and is offered salvation from the poorest to the highest, in every place near and far. The manner of the redemption was amazing, and to those born under the Law it was also confusing, but witnesses were provided, revelations made whether through the star of Bethlehem or an old man who had received a promise from the Holy Spirit: God's promised Messiah had entered into human history and the world would never be the same. Thanks be to God.