

An Odd Christmas Carol

Just as two of the narratives about Jesus' life give us no information about this very important event, the two narratives which do give us information do so very differently. Matthew's narration does not mention why the birth took place in Bethlehem, but does place the event there. Matthew gives an explanation for why Joseph, a righteous man, did not reject Mary as his wife, while this is not an issue even considered by the narrative as given in Luke. However Luke continues his narrative with the events which are important in the life of an observant Jewish family. Luke describes the rituals of life which begin for a boy child with circumcision and naming, the sign of the covenant that this child belongs to God. This ritual occurs eight days after birth. Jesus was given the name told to Mary by the angel Gabriel. These details about rituals for the faithful are the obligations given to parents in Leviticus 12: 3-8. The narrative continues with the rituals outlined in Leviticus for Mary which emphasize not only their faithfulness, but also their social status for the "offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, if she cannot afford a sheep." Our follow-up Christmas carol has moved from signs of cosmic celebrations announcing what God has done to signs that God has chosen parents for this vulnerable babe who will carefully guide him in the ways of the Father who sent him, but who are themselves vulnerable. These guardians of the Savior of the world belong to the social status which cannot afford to offer a sheep for the purification offering required under the Law. That God chooses to act in ways that are not the ways that we understand or can comprehend again are illustrated—the one who comes to save the world is guarded by faithful, but vulnerable servants of God. Of course this visit to the Temple itself to take care of these traditional ritual matters is not without surprises. Luke introduces us to two characters in his narrative that are found nowhere else in the gospel accounts. These two individuals do not show up in our manger scenes or pageants, nor do we know anything else about their lives except what is recorded here. Yet what we have in these accounts of interactions taking place when Jesus was mere days old are also "birth announcements" sent by God revealing the identity of the baby being presented in the Temple that day. That these two individuals encounter Mary and Joseph on this day when they bring the baby to the Temple is significant to us on the basis of their inclusion in Luke's narrative; the inclusion was probably significant to the early believers because they knew or knew someone who had known these people. The inclusion for us is significant because again, it demonstrates how God moves within the lives of ordinary people in unexpected ways. The first encounter described is with a man named Simeon who is described as righteous and devout. He lives in Jerusalem and has been looking forward to what is described in our text as the "consolation of Israel". Verse 26 tells us: "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah." Simeon is not normally at the Temple but on this day, guided by the Holy Spirit, Simeon arrives at the Temple as Mary and Joseph arrive

according to our text “to do what was customary under the law.” The second encounter is with an old woman named Anna, who is identified as the daughter of Panuel of the tribe of Asher. Anna is described not only as an old woman, but a woman of the great age of eighty four who never leaves the Temple, but as a widow of seven years now spends all her time there fasting and praying. She is also identified as a prophet. Jesus is still a baby in arms of about forty-fifty some days as they have come for what are called “purification rituals” which follow a birth. Jesus has yet to speak a word. There has not yet been a miracle of healing of any type. There are no miraculous actions or signs that have occurred. Yet these two people have been led by the Holy Spirit to come...to testify...to proclaim...to identify this child as the one promised by God to redeem people. Upon seeing this child, these two elderly individuals rise up out of the community to give praise to God for what God has done in fulfilling God’s promise of long ago. For most people, neither of these Biblical figures is familiar because they have this one appearance and it is recorded only in Luke’s gospel. Luke is careful to point out that they are both devout individual. Both have been waiting for God to deliver their people, for the fulfillment of God’s promises. Both, like the angels and shepherds before them, recognize that something significant is going on—before them as an infant, is God’s son who has come to redeem their people—to be their Savior. This group present in the Temple is an ordinary cast of characters that God has gathered. Not a single one of them is wealthy, not one of them has political power at that moment, and outside of the actions of that infant, not one of them would be remembered today. Only God would gather such a group together to tell such an incredible story; only God would create such a story to be told. In fact, as Mary and Joseph enter the Temple until Simeon approaches them, nothing out of the ordinary has happened that day. This couple is just doing what every young Jewish couple with a first born son does under the Law. This is an everyday occurrence for faithful Jews honoring their traditions. But when Mary and Joseph entered with Jesus, the text tells us 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 you people Israel.’” Simeon is lifting up praise, giving thanks for this gift of revelation that he has been permitted to live to see the promised savior. What changed this visit of Mary and Joseph to the Temple from the ordinary to the extraordinary was the expectation of Simeon that God would reveal to him the fulfillment of the promised salvation; that he would see the promise fulfilled. Simeon came to the Temple that day guided by the Spirit, and in seeing the infant Jesus begins singing this song of praise that God has kept his promise to him and to the nation...he has allowed Simeon to see God’s salvation for the people. However, as we listen to Simeon’s song, it seems an odd song...it doesn’t sound like the song the angels sang of joy to the world. Simeon’s song is a song of thanksgiving and praise, but it is also of letting go, of departing, of—truth be told—it is a song of dying. This song of Simeon is often called a lament, but is it really a lament? Why does

Simeon offer this oddest of Christmas carols to the holy family? Because in the infant Jesus he has seen a sign and token that the Lord has kept the promises made to the Israelites of old and, in trusting God's promises, Simeon is able to accept his own death with courage. In this song, Simeon is not asking for death as some who call it a lament would have us interpret it, but is simply stating his trust, his acceptance, his peace with the fact of death because he has now seen that God keeps God's promises. As we continue through these twelve days of Christmas which represent the Christmas season, these days until Epiphany and the arrival of the Magi from the East, perhaps we need a to reach for the sense of peace which Simeon felt when he saw the infant Jesus...perhaps we need more of this ability to trust in God's fulfillment of God's promises so we can be open to the revelations which the Holy Spirit has for us about the presence of our Lord moving in this world...places where we can see the face of Jesus in others...places where we can see how and where we are called to work in the mission to which we have been called as his disciples...perhaps our Christmas carols need to last longer than this month. Perhaps we need to focus and trust in the truth that love came down and dwelled among us; that love still lives and moves among us as Christ promised he would always be with us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.