

## BUSINESS AS USUAL

A sermon for Christmas 1b - December 27, 2020

St. Andrew Lutheran Church - Franklin, TN

Luke 2:22-40 - Julian Gordy

Christmas morning, when news of the explosion in downtown Nashville came in over the radio, I thought, “Yep. 2020.” It has been a year, hasn’t it? So, why not a car bomb on Christmas Day to put the cherry on top of a year of strangeness and frustration and disappointment! Sometimes you wonder, “What in the world is going on? What has happened to us?”

Here at the end of the year, many of us harbor a hope, spoken or unspoken, that when we crack open our new calendars for 2021 in a few days, all this craziness - the pandemic, the political weirdness, the regular reports of violence and disaster - you name it - will be over and, “Things will get back to normal!” We hope that 2021 - even if the normal is a “new normal” - will see the return of ***business as usual*** or at least something like it.

But part of the Christmas message is that because God became one of us in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago, business as usual is over. The “good old ways” are gone forever. For those of us who acknowledge Mary's baby boy as our Savior, our Lord, and our God, things have changed in such a dramatic way that they can never again be the same as before God showed up as a poor baby cradled in a manger.

Today is the first Sunday of Christmas. While much of the world is busy removing decorations and signs of our Nativity celebration. We in the church are reminded that Christmas isn’t over. Of course I mean that there are twelve days of Christmas that end on January 6 with the Epiphany. But there is more than that: The birth of the Christ child, like all births, is not the *end* of the story, it is the beginning.

Those of you who are parents know that any birth of any child brings about a radical change to what has been, up to that point, normal. When you have a baby, you always have things to do, and, when that baby is a first-born, you discover how radically a baby can change your life:

- you discover how to get by on three or four hours of frequently interrupted sleep
- you remember fondly the hours you used to spend reading or talking or going out to eat
- you find out just how much the human mind and body and ego can

- stand before it breaks  
and you realize that the next few decades, actually the rest of your life, is going to be an adventure, if you can stand it.

But the birth of Jesus signals even greater changes in the lives of those who would welcome him and call him Lord.

Look at Luke's story of Simeon and Anna: two devout, old people who recognize the impact on the world of Bethlehem's baby.

Simeon is in the temple because he is a scholar of the scriptures and is looking for the Messiah for years. He knows that the prophet Malachi predicted that the Messiah would "suddenly come to his temple," and the Holy Spirit has led Simeon to believe that he will live to meet him.

So, Simeon waits and watches. You can imagine him checking out everyone who comes into the place. If anyone would recognize the Lord, it would be Simeon, the devout, the righteous, the disciplined follower of the Word.

When Simeon sees Mary and Joseph enter the temple with their newborn boy, the old man takes him from Mary. I imagine him lifting the baby Jesus up like Rafiki lifted up baby Simba in "The Lion King." And don't you guess that Mary is a little afraid of this old man who shows such an interest in her baby? Once I saw a painting of Simeon, holding the infant Jesus aloft, while Mary and Joseph looked on, puzzled, almost horrified. They were parents, after all.

Holding the baby, Simeon utters words that are now familiar to most of us. We call the poem he sings the *nunc dimittis*, and, since the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Lutherans have often sung it after communion, and for much longer than that Christians have sung it at funerals and at compline, the last of the daily hours of the church: "Lord, now let your servant go in peace. Your word has been fulfilled! My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people!" Simeon knows that this child whose parents have this day brought him to the temple is the one the world has been waiting for, a sign that God's peaceable reign is beginning and is now among us.

But Simeon follows these reassuring words with an unsettling prophecy. This child will bring pain to Mary and division to Israel and the world.

As soon as Simeon has had his say, Mary and Joseph encounter another

old person, a prophet named Anna. If Simeon is the Bible scholar who knows the old texts forward and backward, Anna knows life. She has had a rough time. Being a widow was not an easy life back in those pre-social security days.

Like Simeon, Anna also recognizes Jesus, but rather than departing in peace, like Simeon, Anna's reaction is to tell everyone the good news. "The Messiah is here among us!" John the Baptist is often said to be the first evangelist, but I think you could make a good case from Luke's gospel that Anna should hold that distinction.

As 2020 winds to a close and we greet 2021 with hope and apprehension, we might think of Simeon and Anna and ask ourselves, "What does it mean for us that this baby has been born? How *does* that, *could* that, ***should*** that birth change the world and change our lives?"

We who follow Jesus approach 2021 knowing that, because of the baby of Bethlehem, we do have hope, no matter what happens. We are, as St. Paul wrote, a new creation. The old things have passed away and we are free to live as God calls us to live, turned away from our obsession with ourselves and toward God and our neighbor in love and acts of mercy.

We've learned a lot in 2020. We've learned how connected we are with one another around the globe. One nation's illness is another nation's illness. One nation's vaccine is every nation's vaccine. We are connected in a web that spans nationality, ethnicity, class, and religion. And we've also learned how important being together is since we have not been able to all those things we've usually taken for granted.

But maybe we've also learned that we are the church even when the ways we've normally experienced church have been impossible. We've learned that we can and do still give witness to Christ's presence in Williamson County and around the world even when we serve our neighbors and reach out in compassion and love to the world God loves. We've learned that we are not privileged just to receive Christ in the Eucharist, but to be Christ to our neighbor in need.

Mary's baby did not come to be locked up in church, but to change the world and to be seen in you and me, the baptized, holy and dearly loved people of God.

As members of Christ's church, one of our 2021 New Year's resolutions has already been made for us: We are to bear witness to the Messiah. We are

to *speak*, *do* and **be** God's good news in the midst of the hurts and disappointments and sorrows of our neighbors. We are to feed the hungry, house the homeless, comfort the grieving, be companions to the lonely, and to proclaim the great good news of the Savior to all who need some good news.

As Simeon warned Mary, to be connected to Jesus in this way may also bring us conflict and division. The old self-centered ways of the world do not go easily, nor do our own old self-centered ways. We can expect some trouble if we are serious about following this Lord.

But whatever happens in 2021, whether we return to business as usual in February or August, or whether we will live in some “new normal” that doesn’t look normal at all, Simeon and Anna remind us that the Messiah has come. God is with us, here and now. And he brings with him challenge and comfort and opportunities to be his presence in our neighborhood and the world.

The late philosopher, theologian, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman put it like this:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
    To find the lost,  
    To heal the broken.  
    To feed the hungry,  
    To release the prisoner,  
    To rebuild the nations,  
    To bring peace among all,  
    To make music in the heart.

Amen.

