

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 Lord²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'),²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, '*a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.*'

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ *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, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ 'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.'

³³ And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ 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 ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—*and a sword will pierce your own soul too.*'

³⁶ 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 for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. *She never left the temple* but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ 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.*

³⁹ When they had finished *everything required by the law of the Lord*, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

¹Like this congregation, the church of my childhood is only a few years older than I am, so we did not have a lot of older people in the church when I was young – my parents mentioned more than once, that when they were still in their 40s, my dad was the second or third oldest man in the congregation and my mom was the fifth oldest woman (I think). The difference was three older women, who had come to help be a guiding presence when that church in Lincoln opened – they were the three older matriarchs of 1st Mennonite in Lincoln: Marge Wolf, Vivian Dinner, and Betty Stalon. They still wore coverings on their heads, at least for much of my childhood, and they sat in the same seats each Sunday. Marge would have been a pastor if she would have been born a generation later, I have no doubt about that – she was passionate and unafraid to share her views. The other two, Vivian and Betty, they were quiet – quiet and faithful. Betty was a librarian – my friend Brett Stauffer fell off of her roof when we reroofing her house. I don't remember much about Vivian, except her long white hair curled in a bun underneath her covering, and that each Sunday after church, she had a piece of Trident gum in her purse for any child who would come and ask.

These were my childhood models of a lifetime of faithfulness to God, these three women – Marge, Vivian, and Betty – the ones who met together for 7a prayer meetings before church; one's who left their other churches to help start First Mennonite. I am sure you have your own Marge's, Vivians and Bettys – those folks who come to mind when you imagine a life of

¹ For the Children's Time, we read Horton Hatches the Egg by Dr. Seuss. I reference this later in the sermon - Horton as an example of faithfulness, despite it being painful, his friends making fun of him, and him almost being killed by hunters. Still, he remains faithful to his task, "100 percent."

faithfulness – it might be from your church, or school; a neighbor, or Grandparent, or piano teacher – those who to you represented faithful service to God and the world.

Our scripture story this morning is about two such examples of lifelong faithfulness, Simeon and Anna, this story of Jesus at forty days old, it is a story of those who have tried to live a life of faithful service to God – to their best understanding of who God was and what that meant for their lives. Simeon and Anna, two who were to the Temple in Jerusalem what Marge, Vivian, and Betty were to us at First Mennonite in Lincoln.



Jesus' parents bring him to the temple, they are fulfilling the law of Moses – the requirements of the Torah. So we should not miss this, in this childhood story of Jesus, we are being told explicitly by *Luke* that Jesus will be raised in a household where the law is faithfully followed – Jesus will grow up fully Jewish. This is to be clear.² Despite the fact that his parents have already

² Mary Schertz, draft commentary on Luke for The Believer's Church Bible Commentary series.

made one lengthy trip to Bethlehem for the census, they now make a second trip to Jerusalem. This would have been extremely taxing on them as we also learn that he comes from a poor family – we know this because of the type of sacrifice that is mentioned, “a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.” This is the sacrificial offering of the poor – those who cannot afford anything larger.³



And when the Holy Family enters the temple, they encounter two prophets, Simeon and Anna, two elderly people who have spent a lifetime in service to God – two who have been waiting for the redemption of Israel. Simeon who we are told is “righteous and devout,” was guided to the temple that day by the Spirit. And Anna, well she was already there because, as the scripture says, “she never left the temple, worshipping there night and day.”

³ Also from Mary Schertz’s draft commentary.

And from the lips of these two who have followed the Jewish law devoutly their entire lives, who stand here as representatives of Jewish faithfulness, they declare that this child will not only be a light for Israel, but a light for the Gentiles – a light for all peoples of the world.

And of all that is happening in this childhood story of Jesus, the idea that keeps emerging for me is that of duty and obligation – the duty of Jesus’ parents who bring him to Temple 40 days after his birth – lost wages and the expense of a trip for a poor family, not to mention the danger of such a trip for a young family – all in the name of following the Torah, each step that it asked of them. But even more than this, the faithful duty of these two elderly followers of God, these two who have given their lives in service to God – Anna and Simeon – they have been faithful, 100 percent.

In the study of ethics, one philosophy revolves around “duty” or “rule-based” ethics. *Horton Hatches the Egg* came to mind this week, because in my Ethics class, it was what our professor read to us as an example of duty based ethics – where one’s choice is judged not based on the outcome or consequences, but is judged based on whether you are fulfilling your obligation or duty – whether you have a particular rule or guiding principle that you are seeking to follow. Regardless of the outcome, you are focused on maintaining your principle – of fulfilling your duty. In Horton’s case, his rule – apparently the rule of all elephants – is to keep his word, to be faithful to a promise that he has made. And so he sits and sits – though it brings him the ridicule of friends, a brush with death by hunters, sea-sicknesses, and being put on display – he is determined to be faithful – no matter how foolish he might appear to others.

Though, what I struggle with in Horton's story, and perhaps more importantly in that of Simeon and Anna, is that their faithfulness is rewarded in the end. Horton's egg hatches a child that is half-elephant, half-bird; Simeon and Anna both get a glimpse of the Messiah – they both get what they have been longing to see, and now they can depart this world in peace. In the end it feels like we are being told that our faithfulness will be rewarded in the end – if we give, we will receive – if we are faithful, our faithfulness will be rewarded. But we know that it is not always like this – we know that the rain falls on the just and the unjust; that the sun shines on the righteous and the unrighteous – we know that faithfulness to the kingdom of God offers us no guarantees, other than service to the kingdom of God (and if we do it really well, we are likely to end up in prison or dead, or at least ridiculed and left by our friends).

And so what of duty, what of obligation and faithfulness? Is this enough to motivate us? There has been a generational shift away from making decisions based on duty and obligation – these concepts seem to have a decreasing amount of meaning and power? Does fulfilling a duty or obligation have a role in our world today? In our life of faith? This might be the most I can hope for in this sermon, that when you are eating lunch or driving home you will consider the place of duty and obligation for yourself.

I find this a difficult question, what is the role of duty or obligation in my own life of faith? When Jenna and I were talking about this yesterday, we mentioned how these concepts are not very inspiring – words like duty and obligation don't get us too excited. Ideas of what I should be doing, this is not of much motivation to me. I want to want to do something; I want to be motivated to do something; I want to know the purpose behind what I am doing – I do not

want to simply act because it is an obligation or feels like my duty. Perhaps in this way, I am more a product of my generation and those after me who feel less motivated by a sense of duty. So, this is likely more of a sermon for me than for those of you here, as you are likely still part of a congregation, at least in part, because of times of feeling a sense of duty.

“What do I want to do?”, “What am I gaining from it?”, “What will I get out of it?” , “What does it mean to me?” These seem to be more the questions that motivate people of my generation and younger (generally speaking of course). While previous generations have been more motivated by a sense of fulfilling their duty – be it to God or country or denomination or community – there is a noticeable shift away from this. I remember a few years ago during a visit at home with my parents, after seeing him put a check in the offering plate (like he had done all my life), I asked him, “Do you ever think that money could have been spent more wisely? Do you ever feel weird about all the money you have spent over the decades on a pastor’s salary, and lights and heat?” To which he said, “No, I always felt it was important to have a Mennonite Church in Lincoln – to have a community of justice and peace in this city.” That was an answer of duty.

I think that where those who act out of duty have sometimes fallen short is in explaining why they do the things they do – we do not always talk our walk – we do not always explain what lies underneath that action; we did not always tell the next generation why we thought this was an important duty or obligation to fulfill.

And so, while I struggle with the concept of duty a bit, I think it has a role to play in our life of faith. In our life of faith, there are many things that we do not always feel like doing – prayer,

financial support, getting up for church, going to meetings, answering another email, making a meal – we sometimes call some of these things disciplines, things that we believe form us and shape us over time. We have a belief that underneath these things, that over the long-run, these things are forming us and shaping us into people we want to be; that being part of a community helps shape and form us into the people we want to be, into who God wants us to be; that praying and meditating and studying forms us into who we want to be, into who we think God wants us to be. And so underneath our sense of what sometimes (or often) feels like duty or obligation – underneath that lies a belief that fulfilling that duty plays an important role in our life, in our world. We believe that in the long-run, the Spirit of God is at work molding and shaping us in these actions, even if it may not always be what I want to do in that moment, or not be what is easiest for us. I remember having to pull over on my drive to seminary, as tears overwhelmed me – not tears of joy, but of wondering why I felt this sense of obligation so strongly – why did I have to do this. It felt like a heavy obligation.

I have been thinking of my duty a bit differently lately. I think about that I have duty as man, in a world that has been dominated by men, to listen to women who speak of their experience of abuse at the hands of men – I have a duty to listen and learn, not to question or rationalize away their experience. I have a duty to listen to the ways that speaking only about a male God has misshaped us as a Christian faith. I have a duty to try and reflect on the ways that I allow maleness to influence the ways I am a husband and father – to try and change that. This summer one of my friends, at a dinner asked, “so, how does patriarchy play out in your marriage?” That is a question that I prefer not to think about, but I have a duty to do so.

When I came out of seminary I had no worry about finding a job: I was youngish, I had been to seminary, and I was a man. This meant, I at least had a chance at every opening – this was not true for my female colleagues. I have a duty to help change this. As a man, it may be in my best interest to try and maintain patriarchy and a male-dominated culture, but I believe that this is not who God is, that it is not what God wants for me, or our world.

I have a duty as a white person to listen to people of color tell me about their experience of this country – to not dismiss it, but to listen. I have a duty to read theology by those who have a different framework and life experience than myself. I have a duty, as someone who is given power because of my gender, skin-color and position – I have a duty to give some of that power up, to try and allow others to make decisions and take the lead. This is not what I want to do, I like to be in control. But this is what I believe the Beloved Community is about, what the kingdom of God is about.

I have a duty as someone who is part of the richest 5% of the world (if you earn \$33,000 or more a year, you are with me in this 5%) to try and redistribute some of that wealth – to give to those who are hungry and in need of shelter – to pay taxes that provide health care and housing and foreign aid to those in need. Because this is what I believe the kingdom of God is about.

I have a duty as one who believes in the ways of peace.

I have a duty, as one who stands up here most Sundays, to proclaim hope. That even though I don't always feel it – that even though sometimes I question it, and question God, and question myself – I have a duty to be honest, and to be about radical hope. Because that is who I want to be. Because, that is who I want us to be.

There are of course times when we continually question our obligation and what lies underneath them – when we continue to be unsure if a particular something still has value or meaning or is still forming us into who we want to be or who we believe God is – these may be times for a change, for reform, or for throwing off a particular duty or obligation. These times certainly exist.



In these two figures and Simeon and Anna, we see the Spirit of God at work in two different ways. Simeon was lead to the Temple by the Spirit – something moved him to be there, to get up and go to that place in that moment. And Anna, who is always there, day and night – day in and

day out – fulfilling what she felt called to. An act that I am sure at times brought her joy, and at other times felt like pure obligation. Both ways that the Spirit worked in the lives of these prophets – in the newness and in the mundane. May we be such a people, guided by the newness of the Spirit as well as the mundane. Amen.

