

Treasure This in Your Heart: Child Dedication  
A sermon preached at  
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church  
Edmonton, Alberta  
by Carol Penner  
February 7, 2016  
Texts: Luke 2: 19, Luke 2:25-40, Luke 18:15-17

Today I want to talk about gifts of God that amaze us. And how we treasure these gifts in our hearts. It starts with this amazing little story from the gospel of Luke, the story of the Presentation of Jesus.

You know that we celebrate the events in Jesus' life with special days like Christmas, Pentecost and Easter. The event of Jesus' Presentation in the temple has been a Christian holy day from the earliest church in the 300s...it's called Candlemas. You probably haven't heard of that holiday, I think Protestants, by and large, haven't kept up with that holiday. Candlemas was this past week...it's always on February 2, because the Presentation of Jesus in the temple happened 40 days after his birth. (Maybe we don't celebrate Candlemas in Canada and the United States because February 2 has been taken over by Groundhog Day! )

Mary and Jesus came to the temple for purification and presentation, as was the custom for Jewish parents, forty days after the birth of the baby. I wonder what it was like for Mary and Joseph, the day they went to the temple with Jesus.

They had been given divine signs that their child was the Messiah of Israel; Mary received a visit from an angel. You can imagine that Mary was more than a little surprised by the location of Jesus' birth, given the importance of this baby to God and Israel. The angel just hadn't said anything about a stable. It was not a very glamorous beginning for the Saviour of the world. So far in Luke's gospel, not many people have recognized Jesus. In Matthew's gospel there was the visit of the wise men, but that story is not included in this gospel. And if you want to try to harmonize the two gospels, Mary & Joseph left for Egypt shortly after the wise men's visit. So the Presentation likely happened before the visit of the wise men. Here in Luke's gospel, up to this point, Jesus has been incognito in the world. Only a very select few people knew who he was: Mary, Joseph and her cousins Elizabeth and John.

I wonder what Mary and Joseph were expecting when they went up to the temple with Jesus. When we read this story we take it for granted that Jesus led a normal everyday sort of life up until he was around thirty. But his parents...they may have expected something different. Jesus didn't come with a manual saying "Everything will be pretty normal until your son reaches puberty, when he'll run away and you'll find him in the temple, then he'll settle down until he is around thirty." No, Mary and Joseph had to figure out what it meant to be a parent to a messiah.

Imagine Mary and Joseph walking up to the temple. Jerusalem is on a hill, and the Temple in Jesus' time was on a prominent corner of the walled city. You would see it from a long way off and as you got closer it would tower above you. As they entered the gate and walked up the long road with the stairs to the temple, what were their thoughts? They were walking to the HOUSE OF GOD with the chosen one of Israel. Here he would be in plain view of everyone important...priests, scribes, Pharisees. Surely in her heart Mary must have been wondering whether this would be the beginning of Jesus' big life. Maybe people would be falling all over themselves trying to be near Jesus, maybe there would be offers of help, a good home, the best schools for this special child. What plans does God have in store for their special baby?

Mary and Joseph enter the temple, and I can see them watching the priest closely as he performs the rituals. They look at the priest...does he get it? Does he see how special Jesus is? Perhaps at this point Mary's eyes scan the heavens. An angel may arrive, to let people know who is among them.

But all that happens is... nothing. Well, not exactly nothing. They move up in the line, the ritual happens, they give their two turtledoves. Just an ordinary everyday acceptance of the sacrifice for a newborn baby, and then they are on the way out. It's over. I can imagine it must have been underwhelming. What were their feelings as they turned to go? Perhaps a bit dazed, maybe disappointed, puzzled?

As they are heading out, they see a very old man hobbling toward them. Not an important man, not a priest, not a man with a title, not a man with rich robes, just an ordinary everyday man. He is Simeon. We are told that he has been waiting for the consolation of Israel, and that it has been revealed to him that he will not die until he has seen the Messiah. And scripture gives us this image of what happened next, an image that seared itself in Mary's mind, because surely it was she who related this story to the gospel writer. The image of a little six week old baby, little tiny fists waving, with tiny dimples on each knuckle, cradled in the wrinkled hands of Simeon. A recognition of Jesus' divine mission. And then an old woman named Anna comes, and she recognizes the connection between Jesus and the redemption of Israel too.

This confirmation of Jesus' identity was a gift to Mary and Joseph, and the story tells us that Mary and Joseph were...amazed. It's not the first time we are hearing the word amazed in this chapter. When the shepherds arrived at the stable talking about angels, Mary & Joseph were also amazed. Mary stored that amazement away, she treasured it in her heart.

Mary and Joseph were being given a hard job, an important job to do, to raise the Messiah. Confirmation that they had not dreamed or imagined this was important as they set out on this task. I am not sure they were expecting shepherds, or an old man or woman to be the people who recognized Jesus. But the confirmation happened, and it amazed them. This gift was something they could think about and treasure in their hearts as they raised Jesus.

Simeon's prayer that Mary and Joseph heard was:  
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.'

This song of Simeon was a strong message; Jesus had something to do salvation, not just for the Jews, but for all people. He would be a light of revelation to the Gentiles. These are words that would have been challenging and mysterious to Mary and Joseph.

For us, of course, they are words of hope and promise. These verses are, in fact, so full of hope and promise that they been extremely important in church history. This song of Simeon is a part of the evening prayer service in Catholic and Anglican traditions; and in many services as the dismissal after the Eucharist. Because it is such a foundational scripture in so many traditions it has been set to music by many different famous composers. Before our service today we heard the setting by

Thomas Tallis. Now let your servant depart in peace...for my eyes have seen your salvation. We will be singing these words as our benediction song today.

I wonder if this meeting with Simeon and Anna was where Mary got her first glimpse of what kind of salvation Jesus was bringing. Here in the gospel of Luke, it's not the people with power and privilege and responsibility who recognize Jesus. With amazement, Mary and Joseph realize it's the lowest and the least that get the revelation. The Holy Spirit working through everyday ordinary people.

So how does this story resonate with what is happening today? Today we have babies coming here to be presented in front of the church. We look around and we see young fresh faces, we see faces of every age gathered around. We hear blessings being pronounced. And so the story of Jesus being presented in the temple is especially fitting.

I want to suggest today that babies are a gift from God to these families and to us. A gift that causes us to be amazed. A gift we can treasure in our hearts. A gift that helps us see the salvation of God.

This morning I have four ways that babies are a gift, there are hundreds more ways, but I am going to give four this morning. I am going to be talking about how babies are a gift to the people who love them, but I want to be clear that I am not talking just about parents. Loving babies is an amazing experience, and this includes anyone who is connected to a baby, as a friend or a grandmother, an uncle or a cousin, as a congregation. Many people around a baby can experience a baby as a gift from God.

The first way that babies are a gift from God is that they show us the beauty of human life. Babies are beautiful. I was excited to have a baby when I was pregnant with our first child. And yet I was unprepared for how much I would love my baby. I could not get over how beautiful she was. I couldn't stop looking at her. I was amazed at how totally wrapped up I was in loving my baby. This was an amazing experience, an overwhelming experience of beauty. But what was also amazing was that my love for my baby changed how I looked at other babies. I had never been a "baby person"...one who loves to hold babies and is crazy about babies. But after I had my own baby, I suddenly realized that all babies were incredibly beautiful. I could gaze at other people's babies with great interest, my heart melted when I saw babies.

My beautiful baby turned into a beautiful toddler, and suddenly I looked around and saw other toddlers, and realized just how amazing toddlers were. Toddlers of any kind started melting my heart. And then when my daughter started kindergarten, I loved school age children suddenly. And then it was adolescent kids. I never paid much attention to teenagers, I thought they were kind of annoying. But once you have loved a teenager, when you look around and see teenagers, you think how lovable they are, how interesting, how full of promise.

And now that my kids are in their twenties, I look at twenty year olds I meet, I wonder about their lives, I find them amazing. The beauty of newborn babies and the love they inspire is something I have treasured in my heart, and it has changed me in ways I did not expect. It has opened my eyes to see the Holy Spirit of God resting on every human being, I can't look at the world in quite the same way.

The second way that babies are a gift is that they help us get out of our own skin and into their skin. I knew a woman once whose name was Marnie. She was single, and in her forties she adopted a four

year old girl. You can imagine how your life changes when suddenly you have a four year old in your life. It was a change for her and a change for all her friends.

Marnie got a call from one of her friends one spring morning asking if she could drop by. The friend arrived with a cup full of the first new strawberries from her garden. "I know how much you love strawberries, so I wanted to bring you these fresh new strawberries!" They sat down for coffee, and Marnie's little girl came running up, and Marnie said, "I want you to try these fresh new strawberries!" And she placed a strawberry in the little girl's mouth. And the little girl loved it and asked for another and another. Before you knew it the little girl had eaten all the strawberries, and then she ran away to play again.

Marnie's friend said, in a disappointed way, "You didn't even get one...and I know how much you wait for the first fresh new strawberries." And Marnie told her friend, "I enjoyed the strawberries in the mouth of my daughter more than in my own mouth."

When you love babies, you share their life. The joy of the child you love becomes your joy.

But getting out of your own skin and into the skin of the child you love isn't just about joy. It is also about suffering. When you love a child, you enter into children's pain. I think of Mary. Simeon told her the joyful words about Jesus bringing salvation for Israel, but he also said the ominous words, "A sword will pierce your soul also." I think everyone who has loved a child knows this is true. The pain our loved ones feel also pains us, their suffering is our suffering. I wonder how these words of Simeon haunted Mary. Did she wonder each year whether this was a year when a sword would pierce Jesus? When Jesus was lost at the age of 12, I can imagine her being convinced that he would have been hurt by a sword, or the time Jesus preached in Nazareth, and they wanted to throw him off the cliff, or any of the other many times Jesus faced opposition. Each time she wondered, is this the sword that will pierce him? Maybe each one was a sword, a pang of fear for the safety of her beloved son Jesus.

Babies are a gift from God because they help us get out of our skin, they teach us in very real ways what it means to love your neighbour as yourself, to truly share their joy and sorrow.

Third, babies are a gift because when you love a child, it can change the urgency with which you want to confront evil in the world. We saw that playing out on the world stage in the last few months. Little three year old Alan Kurdi drowned as his desperate refugee family tried to make the journey from Turkey to Greece in a little rubber boat. His body washed up on the beach, and a journalist took a picture, a picture that spread around the world.



That picture changed the way people were responding to the Syrian refugee crisis. The reason that picture has had such a big impact is because we love babies. We have been given the gift of babies, we have cared for them, we have seen their vulnerability. We see the beauty of all babies, and we don't want them to be hurt. When we see babies being hurt over and over again, the world decides something has to be done.

Fourth, babies are a gift because they open our eyes to the future. For many of us, we haven't thought much beyond things today, and making things comfortable for ourselves. Peace in our time is what we care about, resources for our time, clean water for our time. We enjoy seeing documentaries about animals like gorillas living in the wild. When you love children, your eyes peer into the future, and you desire, you want to see peace for your child, resources for your child, clean water for your child. You want this to be a world where animals like gorillas can exist in the wild outside of a zoo. And you can even think about your child's children, and that child will grow up and have children. Suddenly your eyes are seeing in a new way the importance of the future, and preparing for that future today.

Those are four basic ways babies are a gift. They are a gift because they are beautiful, they help us get out of our own skin, they urge us to make the world a better place, they make us think about the future beyond our lifetime. All of these things are, I think, the work of the Holy Spirit. When we ponder these things in our heart, we become open to seeing the salvation of God in our world.

Maybe that's why Jesus took a child and said, "Let the children come to me...it is to such as these that the kingdom belongs." (Luke 18:15-17) Jesus didn't just say to a group of adults, "Children can teach you something." He wasn't being abstract. He held a child in his arms, a living breathing particular child, a child with messy hair, and scrapes and their knees. An individual child. The lowest and the least. It is to such as these that the kingdom belongs.

For those of you who are parents or who help with caregiving of babies; as you cradle them, feed them, clean them up and tuck them in, as you read stories to them and pray with them, pray that God will change you through this child.

And pray for our community too. What happens if we become a community that truly treasures children as a gift from God? We become a community that is tuned to the beauty of human life, a community open to the joy and pain of others, a community concerned about the safety of all children in our community and around the world, a community concerned about the future of our environment and our planet. Practically, it means that people are eager to volunteer in children's church or Sunday school, to spend time with children. And if those aren't your gifts, it can mean being supportive to people who are doing the caregiving. Children are a gift that should not be appreciated just in an abstract way, "It's good our church has children". It should mean we meet children as people. It means not just talking to the parents, but talking to the kids, getting down on their level. Introducing yourself, getting to know their names.

I remember we were trying to find a church home when my daughter Katie was six months old. On our first visit to a church one of the oldest members came up and greeted us, and then she asked our baby's name, and we told her. Then she shook Katie's hand and said, "Welcome to our church Katie! My name is Lena." I was very struck by that, because often adults will have conversations ignoring the little human beings that are hanging onto us or running around below us. We decided to stay in that church. That's where we raised our children.

At Lendrum, we are not a perfect community. We don't understand everything, or do everything right. But can we just glimpse this? Can we just see the beauty of the babies that God has given us? They are a gift, a treasure, but not a treasure that can be hoarded or grasped. They are a treasure that is ours to share for a time. A treasure to hold lightly and to cherish deeply. A treasure that can open our eyes to the salvation of God.