

December 31, 2023
Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph
Luke 2:22-40

When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be consecrated to the Lord," and to offer the sacrifice of "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons," in accordance with the dictate in the law of the Lord.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying: "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in sight of all the peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel." The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted (and you yourself a sword will pierce) so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived seven years with her husband after her marriage, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple, but worshiped night and day with fasting and prayer. And coming forward at that very time, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Background:

The Gospel text presents a picture of the faithfulness of Joseph and Mary. In the first verses of the second chapter of his Gospel, Luke tells his community that Joseph and Mary went to Nazareth to be enrolled in order to fulfill the decree of Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1-5). Just as Joseph and Mary are faithful fulfilling the command of the civil authorities, here they are also faithful fulfilling their religious requirements of purification. In this text, Luke states five times that Joseph and Mary are acting to fulfill the law. (Verses 22, 23, 24, 27, and 39)

The Jews believed that the blood contained the life force of a person and of animals, which it belonged to God, and that it was sacred. Therefore, all contact with blood was avoided and treated with a special reverence. When that separation was not preserved, the people and the object that came in contact with the blood needed to be ritually purified. Naturally, both birth and death became the focus of purification practices. Another belief within the Jewish tradition was that the first-born son belonged to God. That special relationship was acknowledged by the requirement to offer a sacrifice to God for every first-born male child that was born. A poor couple were to offer a pair of pigeons or turtledoves, those who could afford to were to offer a sheep or goat as an acknowledgement of God's claim on the child.

In the text, Joseph and Mary have taken Jesus the temple to make the necessary offerings in fulfillment of requirements associated with these two beliefs. While they are there, they encounter Simeon and Anna. This encounter probably takes place in the outer courtyard of the temple where women are permitted. When Simeon addresses Mary, he is breaking the code of conduct that prohibits contact and separates men and women, especially in public, this and draws attention to the encounter. Both Simeon and Anna are described as people who had spent much of their lives waiting for the day of fulfillment. Anna is one of a very few prophetesses

who are mentioned in the scriptures. But they recognized the presence of the Christ in Jesus, even as an infant, as he is brought to the temple. While it is not directly stated, it is implied that the religious officials, who would have been about the temple area, did not recognize God's presence within the child.

Reflection Questions:

1. Can you recall ways that the culture and values of your parents affected how you were raised?
2. How did you feel about those aspects then?
3. Do you think you appreciate the importance that your parents' values had on shaping the person you are today?
4. How are you feeling now, reflecting on how the culture and its values affected how Mary and Joseph raised Jesus?
5. Luke describes both Simeon and Anna as having waited with prayer and fasting for many days, weeks, and even years for the coming of God's anointed. What role does this faithful waiting have in the ability of Simeon and Anna to recognize the presence of God in the child that Joseph and Mary have brought this day to the temple?
6. What other examples of faithful waiting are present in the scriptures?
7. Are there times of faithful waiting also present in your own life?
8. What is the Church telling us about our relationship with God and one another by having us reflect on this story of Joseph and Mary's encounter with Simeon and Anna on the feast of the Holy Family?
9. The last verses of the Gospel suggest that Joseph, Mary, and Jesus returned to their home and lived lives that would appear common for poor Jewish families of the day. Can you talk with God now about your life, your upbringing, and how you feel about God being present in your own life?

The Gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel. The excerpts from the Sunday readings are prepared by Joe Thiel. To be added to the distribution list, send your name and email address to fr.paul.gallagher.ofm@gmail.com.

Our Gospel Reflections are hosted by the Franciscan Sisters of Christian Charity. Their homepage is <https://fsccl-calledtobe.org/>. One link there is labeled Franciscan Gospel Reflections. A click on the icon will take you to the Gospel reflections for the upcoming Sunday. By following this link, you will be able to blog or comment on the reflection questions. The material will be posted on Fridays and will be available until the following Friday when the new material is posted.

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***Because all the readings except the Gospel have alternatives, all of which refer to Abraham, they are presented here together as a second complete set, with the optional shortened Gospel.*

Excerpts from the readings for December 31, 2023, Feast of The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying: "Fear not, Abram! I am your shield; I will make your reward very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what good will your gifts be, if I am childless and have as my heir the steward, Eliezer? You have given me no offspring."

Then the word of the Lord came to him: "No, that one shall not be your heir;

Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can. Just so shall your descendants be."

Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness.

The Lord took note of Sarah as he had said he would; he did for her as he had promised.

Sarah bore Abraham a son in his old age, as God had stated. Abraham gave him the name Isaac.

The Lord remembers his covenant forever. Give thanks to the Lord, invoke his name.
Sing to him, sing his praise, proclaim among the nations all his wondrous deeds.
Glory in his holy name; rejoice, O hearts that seek the Lord! Look to the Lord in his strength.
You descendants of Abraham, his servants, sons of Jacob, his chosen ones!
He, the Lord, is our God. He remembers forever his covenant which he made binding
for a thousand generations which he entered into with Abraham and by his oath to Isaac.

Brothers and sisters: By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place
that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go.
By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age—and Sarah herself
was sterile—for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy.
So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead,
descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore.
By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises
was ready to offer his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name."
He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol.

[Short version] When the days were completed for their purification according to the law of Moses,
they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. When they had fulfilled all the prescriptions
of the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.
The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Excerpts from Genesis 15:1-6; 21:1-3; Psalm 105:1-9; Hebrews 11:8, 11-12, 17-19; and Luke 2:22, 39-40

Excerpts from the readings for December 31, 2023, Feast of The Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph

God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons.
Whoever honors his father atones for sins, and preserves himself from them.
When he prays, he is heard; he stores up riches who reveres his mother.
Whoever honors his father is gladdened by children, and, when he prays, is heard.
Whoever reveres his father will live a long life; he who obeys his father brings comfort to his mother.
Take care of your father when he is old; grieve him not. Even if his mind fail, be considerate of him; kindness
will not be forgotten, planted against the debt of your sins—a house raised in justice to you.

Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways!
For you shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; blessed shall you be, and favored.
Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in your home; your children like olive plants around your table.
Behold, thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord.
The Lord bless you from Zion: may you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

Brothers and sisters: Put on, as God's chosen ones, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility,
gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another,
if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.
And over all these put on love, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts.
And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish
one another, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.
Do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
Wives, be subordinate to your husbands, as is proper in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and
avoid any bitterness toward them. Children, obey your parents in everything, this is pleasing to the Lord.

Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged.

When the days were completed for their purification, they took him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord, just as it is written in the law of the Lord, to offer the sacrifice of a pair of turtledoves. There was a man, Simeon, who was righteous, awaiting the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him, and had revealed to him that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ. He came in the Spirit into the temple; he took Jesus into his arms and blessed God, saying: "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, a light to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel." The child's father and mother were amazed at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be contradicted—and you yourself a sword will pierce— so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed." There was also a prophetess, Anna, a widow, she was eighty-four. She worshiped night and day. She spoke about the child to all who were awaiting the redemption of Jerusalem. They returned to Nazareth. The child grew strong, filled with wisdom; the favor of God was upon him.

Excerpts from Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14; Psalm 128:1-5; Colossians 3:12-21; and Luke 2:22-40

Friends,

Here are the gospel background and reflection questions for December 31st, the feast of the Holy Family, as prepared by Franciscan spiritual director Fr. Paul Gallagher. The gospel is from Luke, relating the story of the presentation of Jesus in the temple. Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple to present him to be consecrated and to offer sacrifice, as the law requires for every firstborn male. While they are there, a devout man, Simeon, and a prophetess, Anna, both recognize the infant as the one who is to be the Messiah. Simeon blesses God saying, "My eyes have seen your salvation." Anna speaks about the child to all who await the redemption. The other readings also have references to children. In a rare Lectionary occurrence, there are second options for all the readings except the gospel, which allows for an alternative set of readings that all refer to Abraham. Because of this, we treat them separately here.

In the first reading from Sirach, we hear, "God sets a father in honor over his children; a mother's authority he confirms over her sons. He who obeys his father brings comfort to his mother." Psalm 128 proclaims, "Blessed are you who walk in the Lord's ways. Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine; your children like olive plants around your table." In the second reading, from the letter to the Colossians, Paul writes, "Children, obey your parents. Fathers, do not provoke your children, so they may not become discouraged."

In the other first reading from Genesis, the word of the Lord came to Abram, "Count the stars, if you can. Just so shall your descendants be... And Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son who Sarah bore him." Psalm 105 declares, "Look to the Lord, you descendants of Abraham. The Lord remembers his covenant forever." In the other second reading from Hebrews, "By faith Abraham received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age. By faith, when put to the test, he was ready to offer up Isaac, his only son."

The Holy Spirit is a relevant presence in today's gospel, especially as regards Simeon. "The Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Christ of the Lord. He came in the Spirit into the temple..." It was when the parents in this Holy Family brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law that Simeon took him into his arms and blessed God, and declared what had been revealed.

Joe

> i < May the Word light your way each day!

*In sight of all the peoples you prepared
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and glory for your people Israel.*

Luke 2:31-32