

Pasto Jonna Bohigian
Unusual Suspects
Luke 2:22 – 40

O come, O come, Immanuel,
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

Refrain:

Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
shall come to you, O Israel.¹

This was the song on the hearts of the people of God who *longed* for the arrival of the Messiah, their savior king. Many had come, *claiming* to be the Messiah, but each one died, and the people's situation remained the same. They waited. And waited. And *waited*. *How long* would he be? How many more *generations* would pass, before the Messiah would come, to deliver them from their enemies and bring about a kingdom that would *never* end?

Simeon was old and grey, waiting his *whole life* for the arrival of the Messiah. He was a righteous man, and had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Prompted by the Holy Spirit, he went into the temple courts. He swept a child up into his arms, and gave glory to God, because God had fulfilled His promise. The child in his arms was the Messiah, who would bring salvation to the entire *world!* Simeon could now die in peace, because God had fulfilled His promise!

Simeon seems like an odd choice to be among the first to encounter the Messiah. He is old and won't be able to influence many with his newfound knowledge. But then again, the Christmas story is *replete* with surprises and odd choices. A poor virgin carries the child to term,

¹ https://hymnary.org/text/o_come_o_come_emmanuel_and_ransom

and has the baby near the *animals*. The legitimacy of the child's birth will constantly be in question, because *everyone* knows that Joseph is not his father. Lowly shepherds are the *first* to hear the good news of the birth of this baby by an *army* of angels, singing praise to God! Astronomers from the East, *foreigners*, come to worship him, and bring him the gifts of a *king*. The baby's cousin *also* has a miraculous birth, but his dad becomes mute for a while, because he fails to believe the miracle.

And then there's Anna. After Simeon praises God, blesses the baby's parents, and prophesies a divisive and tragic future, a woman named Anna comes onto the scene. (And don't worry – we'll come back to Simeon's prophecy.) In our minds, Anna would be *another* unusual suspect. She has been a widow for many years, and is rather eccentric; she is at the temple day and night, fasting and praying. Anna is a prophet, and the author of Luke goes to *lengths* to legitimize her. But for all intents and purposes, Anna is another unknown person without any power. Yet, she is given the privilege of being one of the *first* to meet the Messiah.

The saying, "God works in mysterious ways," could not be truer. God chooses to *first* reveal the Messiah to the poor, to outsiders, to pagans, to the elderly, and to *women!*

If you and I were to strategize how we might most effectively communicate important news, we would likely seek out reputable, powerful, well-known people with a platform. We *wouldn't* look for unusual suspects among the *least* reputable, *least* esteemed people.

Now, if Luke desired an audience, he *definitely* shouldn't have mentioned Anna. Women *weren't* reputable witnesses and had much less of a voice than women do in *our* culture. Yet Luke decided to *continually* share the voice of women *throughout* his Gospel, and did so in a unique way. Luke placed stories of women side-by-side with men, 27 times! There's the story of

Zechariah and the story of Mary, receiving news of their children's miraculous births. There's the story of Simeon and the story of Anna. There's the story of Jesus healing a man and then Jesus healing a woman. There's the story of Jesus' male disciples and the story of his female disciples, responding to his resurrection. And on and on and on, throughout the Gospel of Luke! 27 male-female pairs!

Though the culture *didn't* esteem women, Luke wanted to *clearly communicate* that women were not simply to be *esteemed*; they were to be *models* for discipleship, and that God was up to something *new!* God was not simply doing something big within the old cultural model; God was doing something *new*, something *unpopular*, something *revolutionary!* Quoting Mary from her song in chapter 1, God was lifting up the humble (Lk 1:52b)!

When I was young, I wanted to be one of "the guys." In my experience, the guys were the ones with the cool jobs and the ones people listened to. Guys were respected and were the leaders. I remember saying to my sister when I was in 5th grade, "If I were a man, I would be a pastor." Simple as that. It didn't seem like an odd statement to me. I didn't have female role models in the pulpit, and I believed that pursuing the pastoral path would be futile, because I was told that *no one* listens to women. *Men* don't listen to women, and *women* don't listen to women. I don't know if I heard this statement once or if I heard it multiple times, but this became a tape engrained in my memory, and I *still* find it lurking in my subconscious. *No one listens to women – not men, not even women.*

My inclination is that my tape is not yours, but that we all have tapes which have played for *many* years, which are untrue or are no longer helpful. And they are *powerful*. They can be debilitating and cause us to feel disqualified.

But the amazing gift of the gospel is that *no one* is disqualified; *no one* is counted unworthy. And it is to those who have been lowly esteemed and discounted by society, that the good news *first* comes! To a young woman, to shepherds, to an elderly man, to an elderly woman, to pagans. If we take a look at the first chapter in the Gospel of Matthew, we note the unusual cast of characters that Matthew lists as Jesus' *ancestors*. He includes people in the family tree that most would *never* have shared publicly, those who would have conveniently been left out: women, foreigners, evil kings, murderers, prostitutes, poor, and the list goes on...

The good news is not reserved for the rich, the highly esteemed, the accomplished, or even just men. As the angel proclaimed to the shepherds, the good news is a great joy for *all people* (Lk 2:10b)!

As Mary and Joseph go to the temple to present Jesus, they do so as humble peasants, who know that this child was born for the glory of God. Unlike our Old Testament lesson, which gave instructions for parents to *redeem*, or to buy back, their first sons, Luke writes that Mary and Joseph *present* Jesus to the Lord (Lk 2:22b). Like the boy, Samuel, who was given to the Lord in service to Him (1 Sam 1:28), Jesus is *presented* to the Lord. *He is the Lord's*.

In his miraculous conception and birth announcements, Mary and Joseph have heard that their son is from God, that he is the Son of God, and that he will be king forever. But what this means, they are left to wonder. Luke writes that Mary ponders these things in her heart (Lk 2:19). Who this child *is* exactly, and *how* he will accomplish that purpose, they don't know.

But Simeon reveals quite a bit in his short prophecy. First, he praises God that this baby is the salvation for *all people* and the glory of Israel. Then in verse 34, he says to Mary, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be

spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:34b – 35).

It’s not going to be sunshine and rainbows for Jesus. Yes, he *will* bring honor to many; he will cause many who are lowly, to rise. *And* he will cause many to fall. Many will reject him. They *will not* like the purpose for which Jesus has come and will *not believe* that he is the Son of God for all people. He will be put to death, revealing the hearts of many. And Mary too will participate in that suffering. When most others will have fled, Mary will remain at the cross, and will enter into Jesus’ suffering. “Indeed a sword [will] pass through her heart.”²

Amazingly, as Mary hears these words of Simeon, she does *not* reject them. As she did *not* reject the angel’s words that she would become the mother of the Son of God, so she does *not* reject Simeon’s words that *both* she *and* her son will suffer.

Mary is an *incredible* model of discipleship. She is faithful, obedient, thoughtful, and willing to risk her honor and safety for God’s purposes. She is a servant of the Lord. She is a model, especially for those who have suffered because of their children.

The story of Jesus and those to whom God chooses to reveal him, is truly *remarkable!* It’s one you and I could never make up, and one we are tempted to forget and tame. We are tempted to forget that those who first encountered Jesus were the greatest cast of unusual suspects, and the *exact* ones one would choose if they wanted to *delegitimize* their purpose. We are tempted to forget that Jesus was viewed with *disdain* as an illegitimate child. We are tempted to forget that Jesus wasn’t good news for everyone. Yes, he was good news for the world because of the healing he would bring, but he was hated by *many*, and he was killed for

² Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 60.

it. His mother and his disciples suffered too. And many who have followed him since have died and suffered for it.

It is *so* difficult to enter into suffering, and to follow the path that requires sacrifice and risk. Yet, if it is the path that God has called you into, God *will* be faithful to bring about good through it. And that “good” will likely look *unlike* what you anticipate. You will be tempted to reject the path many times, and like Jesus’ closest disciples, you *will* reject it many times. You *will* prove to be a faithless disciple at many points along the journey, and you *will* wonder what in the *world* you are doing. After all, you’re *not* that special, or *that* important, spiritually-speaking. Sacrifice and suffering can be left to the religious elite; you’re just a *regular* person, so you will lead a *regular*, tame life.

But of course, you know that I am being facetious. Not about failing to be faithful, but about being called to a tame life, and that there are spiritual “newbs” and spiritual “elites.” God created you out of His great love for you, and your purpose in this life is *no less important* than anyone else’s. Chances are, if you are in a position that society *doesn’t* esteem, God may choose to bestow upon you the *greatest* honor, and reveal Himself to you in a way only *God* could imagine!

Praise be to God, “for He has been mindful of the humble state of His servant!...For the Mighty One has done great things for [us] – holy is His name. His mercy extends to those who fear Him, from generation to generation” (Lk 1:48 – 50). Glory to God in the highest! Amen.