

ARVADA UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
DECEMBER 28, 2008  
IF YOU MISSED CHRISTMAS – Rev. Rusty Butler  
Luke 2:22-40

You know one of my favorite cartoons is Peanuts, I have a book called, Yes, Santa, there is a Charlie Brown. On the last page, Lucy is walking by Charlie Brown and says, “Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown! At this time of year I think we should put aside all our differences, and try to be kind.

Charlie Brown replies, “Why does it have to be for just this time of year? Why can’t it be all year round?” Lucy looks perplexed for a moment and then she answers back, “What are you some kind of fanatic or something?”

That story has nothing to do with the sermon. But I just thought you’d like it.

Would you pray with me?

O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts lead us down the road to kindness. Amen.

On Christmas Day, Lynn and I, and David and Jared, our sons, went to a movie. We do not get to do that very often. Our tastes are different for one thing. And they’ve got their own lives and schedules and we’ve got ours. You know how that goes. But we got to go to a movie. I will not give away which movie it was. I do not want to spoil it for you. But in the movie, there was an unfortunate event that happened to one of the main characters, she got hit by a taxi. Broke her leg. The narrator of the movie went back over a sequence of small things that happened to a variety of characters before the accident occurred. There was everything from a delay in the wrapping of a package, to the Taxi Driver being delayed by a delivery truck, to a shoe string that was broken, just a series of small events that happened that took their own time and when put together resulted in the main character walking out at just the wrong time and being hit by the taxi.

This character was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I do not know about you but, whenever I've had an accident, I've done the same thing. I think to myself if I'd not gone that route and gone the other way, everything would have been fine. If I'd stayed just a minute longer over lunch then that car would have been gone by the time I got to that corner. And so on. Do you ever do that?

Destiny, fate, kismet, coincidence...people have tried to come up with a way to understand being in the wrong place at the wrong time, or the right place at the right time.

Today we are going to look at a story about two people who were in the right place at the right time.

The story goes like this...Luke 2:22-40.

In those days, a child was brought up to the temple to be dedicated on the eighth day. It was the eighth day because, for seven days after the birth, the mother, in this case, Mary was ritually unclean.

Joseph and Mary knew their rituals. They brought the baby, Jesus, up to the temple on the right day.

There are different reasons for following rituals. One is that you do it because somebody tells you to do it. The ritual can be full or empty but you simply follow it.

When people see you do that, they know that it's not really full. Last Sunday night, we had the orchestra play and held a pre-Christmas Eve service. It was grand. At the end of the service, we had the candle lighting ritual. The orchestra was all over the chancel area and so Valerie and I had to stand half way up the center aisle. We stood there with our candles lit, feeling awkward and uncomfortable. We did it because for a long time had someone stand there and lift a candle during one part of Let there be Peace on Earth. Someone in the orchestra said, they look like the Statue of Liberty. Valerie and I talked it over and she said that felt uncomfortable like that. I thought she was right.

On Christmas Eve, we just stayed seated in our chairs behind the pulpit. No Statue of Liberty there! And guess what, people lifted their candles when they wanted to and it worked out just fine.

Another reason you follow ritual is not because you have to do it because you've always done it that way, instead you do the ritual because life is filled out and filled up because you do it. That is a whole different thing. There is a deep awareness of how we are connected to each other through the ages and to God or the holy through the ritual.

Joseph and Mary were good religious people. That's what I think. I think they thought that through this ritual of circumcision, Jesus would be connected to all of those who came before. I believe they thought that ritual was important.

At the temple, Joseph and Mary run into a couple of different people. The first is Simeon. It doesn't say how old he was, but the way he speaks leads one to believe that he was elderly.

In a book called, Older people and church, there was a section which talked about how the patterns of our inner life rarely change with the onset of later maturity. Instead, what usually occurs is a consolidation of the patterns which have all along been most fundamental. In other words, who you've been through out your life is even more solidified as you get older.

If you were grumpy and cranky as a young person, you may just expect to get even grumpier and crankier. We become the people who we've grown to become for better or for worse.

Simeon and Anna, seemed to be two people who are what we would call devout and religious. If they were to be found in our time and in our place, we might call them, church folk. They understood that they were part of a larger process, they were related to something that was larger than their own lives. They had found that apparently through their religion.

This is one of the functions of religion. It helps us to see life in a new perspective. Simeon and Anna were examples of that.

Joseph and Mary wanted to dedicate their son. An old man was exuberant about Jesus. There was no change in society, there wasn't a change in the political or economic reality of the day. There were no big changes in the world.

But what seemed to happen, at least the way the Gospel writer told it, was that Simeon, before he died, hoped he could have in his own mind an awareness, some kind of proof of God's presence in the world. And a baby was brought in to be dedicated. What can a baby offer the world? Baby has no clout, no control, no power. He is like any other little baby. And Simeon saw it, understood it, that this is the way God saves the world. The hope of the world is a baby. Here is potential, possibility, gentleness, vulnerability, openness.

Then he says to Joseph and Mary, now my soul can depart in peace. My eyes have seen the salvation of the Lord.

There is a play about the life of Abraham Lincoln in which Mrs. Lincoln comes into Mr. Lincoln's study on the day that he signed the Emancipation Proclamation. Mrs. Lincoln says to her husband, yesterday would have been too soon, tomorrow would be too late. Now is the day, Now is the time.

Simeon and Anna were religious people. They were bit players in a bigger saga. But they both understood in ways in which the rest of the people did not. They saw a bigger picture. That is something to think about as we enter the new year. What is the bigger picture about? Can we see it in front of us and then will we be able to name it? Something to think about. Amen.