

... they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

Isaiah 61:10—62:3

Psalms 148

Galatians 4:4–7

Luke 2:22–40

Text: Luke 2:39

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.

Introduction

What are your hopes and dreams for the new year ahead? Have you articulated some goals or made some resolutions for 2021? Perhaps you have the sensation that you are not on as sure a footing as you have been in other years for envisioning the future. Planning can seem pointless because you have little control over the colour of zone in which you reside; or maybe you have created colour-coded objectives accordingly.

In an October 2020 essay [Through A Looking Glass Darkly: How \(and how not\) to be certain of yourself](#), humanities professor Dr. Jessica Hooten Wilson began this way:

“When I was a little girl, my favourite book was Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. As much as I disliked cats, the Cheshire Cat defied all expectations with his wisdom. Alice is lost in the woods, exiled in a world that she does not recognize, so she addresses the good-natured-looking Cat: “Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?” Perched in a tree above her and sporting a wide grin full of teeth, the Cat answers, “That depends a good deal on where you want to go.” Alice responds, “I don’t much care where—” and the Cat interrupts, “Then it doesn’t matter which way you go.” This seemingly childish and fantastical conversation sums up rather well the modern problem—both individuals and the communities in which they participate move forward without a sense of direction.”

1. There is very little recorded in the gospels about Jesus’ childhood. A lot of what we do know comes from the pen of St. Luke. However, for many Christians, attention is given to only about half of what Luke tells us. I think this is because of how we celebrate Christmas. The high point, for us, comes in our celebrations on Christmas Eve when we gather in great numbers to hear the story of Jesus born in a stable; of angels visiting shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night; of the shepherd’s visit to the stable on that night of wonder. We can recite many of the lines we know so well. And then, like the shepherds we go home; we go home to our family Christmas celebrations and we don’t often read the rest of the birth story (if at all).

You know that sensation of let down you sometimes feel when everyone goes home (let down came early this year with limits on gathering). Recall that moment in the quiet of your house after everyone has gone home, the joy of being together with loved ones dissipates as they pull out of the driveway and head to their homes. I would often say to Valerie when grandchildren would go home after a stay with us, ‘the house feels empty.’ I wonder if Mary and Joseph feel this way after all the Christians head home on Christmas Eve. The stable feels so empty.

The gospel writer Luke says there is a lot more to this birth story we ought to know about. I can hear Luke saying, as we all get up to shuffle home after hearing him tell of the shepherd heading off praising God, ‘wait a minute, you are missing some of the best parts of the story.’ Here is how the birth story ends in Luke’s telling, “When they had finished everything required by 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 favour of God was upon him.” Luke’s birth story doesn’t end at the stable, rather it ends with the family back in Nazareth.

2. There is the matter of this phrase that Luke repeats regarding Mary. It comes at summary junctures in Luke’s telling; “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart,” or she “treasured all these things in her heart.” If you can imagine Luke interviewing Mary as part of his diligence in preparing to write of Jesus, you would understand that Mary is reflecting back over the course of her life as Jesus’ mother when she speaks of these events surrounding Jesus’ birth. Mary relates these birth stories captured by Luke through the prism of Jesus’ entire life. The unusual events that are riveted in her mind when Jesus was born, events long treasured and reflected upon, find their significance in all that Jesus did and suffered. Mary was in the stable and at the cross and with the believers when the risen Jesus appeared.

Imagine Mary telling Luke about going to the temple for Jesus’ dedication and being surprised by what happened there. The temple was a huge complex that could accommodate thousands of people in its various courts and porticoes. Mary and Joseph aren’t people you would particularly notice. You can tell by how they were dressed that they are people of limited means especially when they show up with the sacrifice that the law provided for poor people. Living in Nazareth going to the temple might have been an annual trip for them—it is always a little intimidating entering an unfamiliar environment and finding your way to the appropriate worship places.

Imagine Mary telling it. ‘And a most remarkable thing happened—not unlike the shepherds showing up at the stable. A devout man named Simeon happened to come into the temple at the very same moment we were there. He came over to us and insisted on holding Jesus and offered the most amazing prayer; ‘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.’ Simeon told us that it was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Joseph and I were amazed.’

‘And if that weren’t enough, there was this prophet named Anna in the temple that day too. Lots of people seemed to know her. She was one of those really devout people who dedicated her life to constant worship and prayer. She was a prophet (for us, think preacher) that the Lord’s people listened to attentively because her preaching was faithful to Israel’s God, bathed in relentless prayer and reflection on God’s word. She began to praise God and speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.’ (“Redemption of Jerusalem” is a loaded term that speaks of what the promised Messiah would do.)

Pause for a moment and think about all that has happened to Mary and Joseph surrounding the birth of Jesus. The visit of angels, the mystery of conception, the decision by Joseph to adopt Mary’s child, the decree that sent them to Bethlehem, the visit of shepherds sent by an angel to

the stable, the witness of Simeon and Anna at the temple, the arrival of Magi from the east who worshipped the child, and the warning to sojourn in Egypt. (Luke does not include the Egypt sojourn in his story; each gospel writer includes some and not other stories of Jesus). What does their future life look like with Jesus in their lives? What hopes and plan and direction would they envision as they move forward. Mary tells us, ‘we returned to Galilee, to our own town of Nazareth.’

As Luke tells us of Jesus, he holds up Mary—and by extension Joseph—to us as an example of faith; a picture of living obediently to God with Jesus in their life. To be sure, in these early days it meant raising Jesus as a child in their home. The picture Luke paints is of a couple doing what they know to do. By all measures, relationship with God is the guiding direction for their lives. The fact that in obedience they name the child Jesus and do all the things the law required at the birth of a firstborn son tells you that this is a devout couple. To be sure, Joseph came home to re-establish his business as carpenter/mason; clearly, he teaches Jesus this trade; a picture that caring for family life is part of what you know to do.

The point I raise with you is this; as Mary and Joseph move ahead into the future that is theirs, they do so with Jesus in their lives. Mary, at the time when she recounts this story for us, is, like us, living life in relationship with the risen Jesus. Whatever you are hoping for in the year of our Lord 2021, the believer goes into the year with Jesus—or, more to the point, he walks with you into the new year. The direction for the life of the believer is walking in company with Jesus. Yes, you may be hoping to land an employment opportunity; you may be thinking about moving to another home; you might be hoping to be accepted in an education programme; you might be contemplating marriage; you might be longing for relief from a health problem. All these and more may be before you—the constant is that Jesus is walking ahead with you in all these things as they unfold in the new year.

3. Luke also wants his hearers to know that these things that happened at the Temple that day when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus for dedication are as much for us as they were for them. You can imagine that Mary and Joseph may be feeling a little uncertain about their future given the rather unusual beginning to their marriage. Perhaps even thinking—did I really see an angel telling me about the child? The surprising meeting with Simeon and Anna—both on the same day with similar news about the child—had to be a confirming moment for Mary and Joseph that they were indeed being led by God. Luke wants his hearers to know that the witness of Simeon and Anna are for us as well. Jesus is the one the gospel asserts him to be—Son of God—and these events add to that witness. When you journey into the new year with Jesus you walk with God.

Listen again to Simeon’s praise of God as he holds Jesus in his arms; ‘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 prayer is known in the church by the first two words in the Latin translation, *Nunc Dimittis*—which means ‘now depart’ or ‘now dismiss.’ (also Song of Simeon.) Because of its implications of fulfillment, peace, and rest, the early church viewed it as an appropriate prayer for the ending of the day. Since the 4th century it has been used in such evening worship services as Compline, Vespers, and Evensong.

This is also the scripture appointed in many pastoral manuals to be read at the bedside of someone who is dying. I have read this on the many occasions when I have the privilege of being at just such a bedside. We can depart in peace because we have seen the Lord's salvation. To be sure, Simeon saw Jesus with his physical eyesight—but how does Simeon recognize him among all the people at the temple that day, likely among other parents presenting children as well. Simeon recognizes Jesus with the eyes of faith. Recall what the risen Jesus said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." The promise to Simeon is also for us—we are prepared for our departing because, with the eyes of faith, we have seen the Lord's salvation, even our Saviour Jesus Christ. Simeon's confession is to be our confession.

Sometimes when a loved one dies near Christmas we have this sense that such occurrence adds sorrow upon sorrow. Christmas is, culturally speaking, to be a joyous occasion for families so we tiptoe around the fact that Christmas is near when we meet a family in such a place. Friends, we need to read the whole Christmas story because it addresses just such a moment. Simeon, who can see that his own death is not far away, holds the infant Jesus and knows he is looking at his own salvation—he holds the one who will tell us, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

Simeon understands that he is holding the Lord's Messiah as he holds Jesus. Anna the prophet declares the same about Jesus—she spoke about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem, that is to those who were longing for God to fulfil the promise to send the Messiah. Anna had dedicated her life to worship at the temple in a constant rhythm of fasting and prayer. It is apparent from Luke's account that when she spoke people listened; they knew her to be a reliable witness of God's word.

Christ Church in Oxford is a Church of England cathedral church; each day the service of morning prayers is followed by the Eucharist. I was there for two weeks of study in successive years and took the opportunity to attend morning prayers. I noticed an elderly lady who came to service every morning; it was clear by how the priests greeted her that she was well known to them. Likely she lived nearby because I would see her coming in through the gate that opened onto St Aldate's walking across the commons to the church. Her witness impressed me; she joined the worship each day—a testimony to faith in Jesus Christ.

Jesus once said, "In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid." (John 8:17). Mary and Joseph would know that point of law well—so when God sent them two witness on that day in the temple, this point of law had to stand out in their minds. These two witnesses, and countless others who have impacted our lives, witness to the wonder of the One who walks before us and beside us into the year ahead. I conclude today with that poem from King George IV's 1939 Christmas address:

"I said to the man who stood at the Gate of the Year.

Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.

And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God.'

That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way."