

Rejoicing in God's Light: Trying to Figure out Difficulty, and Serving All the While

Luke 2:22-40

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Becky and Karen have helped us hear, from Luke, chapter 2, the Bible story of five people in the Roman province of Judah two thousand years ago: Joseph, Simeon, Mary, Anna, and baby Jesus. They are five people. Looking at them, they are ordinary people, struggling for a modest, decent life day-to-week-to-month, at the same time they are attempting to sense and know God's love in and for their lives. Generally, I don't think that they are all that different from you and me centuries later.

To summarize the respective outlooks of the four adults in the story, a sentence for each is printed in the bulletin. The story portrays Joseph thinking: "With thanksgiving, we commit our lives to serving God," with Simeon saying, "I've been hoping in God," with Mary thinking, "I have worries," then with Anna saying, "Blessed be God, and blessed be God's people!" We're not told anything about baby Jesus except that he was the center of attention. While God cannot be seen, the threads of this story include sin, nations, policies, and politics, and individuals trying to figure out difficulty-in-life while serving God among people near and far. When this story tells how Simeon was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (v.25) and that "Jesus' life is a sign which will give rise to opposition" (v.34), Simeon and Anna are to be understood as related to the tradition of Israel's faithful prophets.

As you may know, faithful prophets are not necessarily predictors of the future. In June of 2013, the magazine Sports Illustrated ran a risk of sorts and printed a cover entitled: The 2017 Baseball World Series Champions: Houston Astros. At the end of September in 2013, the Houston Astros had won 51 games and lost 111, and Sports Illustrated was predicting them to win the World Series four years later!? The magazine writers were taking a gamble, but the focus of the article in June 2013 was the Astros' young talent even on a team that would lose more than 2 of every 3 games that season. In addition to talking up the Astros' young talent in 2013, Sports Illustrated was highlighting the management philosophy of the team's "front office." Sure enough, the worst team in Major League Baseball during 2013 won 101 regular season games in 2017, won 112 games overall, and emerged as World Series champions – in 2017. While Sports Illustrated hit the bullseye with this prediction, the faithful prophets of the Bible see trends related to God and God's kingdom more than they ever make predictions.

How do we then bring Simeon and Anna and Joseph and Mary forward by 2000 years to the front yards and living rooms of our lives on the threshold of 2018? Let me briefly tell you of three other characters: (1) one is an imaginary character, (2) a second is a student and teacher of the history of political ideas, and (3) a third is a religious sociologist.

First, the imaginary character . . . Her name is Hester Figgs Bugle. The first storyteller to bring to life Ms. Bugle's antics was a Presbyterian minister, originally from Mississippi, who later served a church in northeast Arkansas. In the 1970s he created this imaginary Presbyterian elder who sent donations to Presbyterian colleges, and who sent letters and picture postcards to a variety of Presbyterian clergy and institutional trustees. As Ms Bugle's reputation spread around, some later storytellers imagined her devoting her travels to a study of "original sin." She would send those picture postcards from bars, casinos, halls of government, sites of religious shrines, from financial districts, shopping malls, athletic venues, corporate offices, wilderness areas, and ocean beaches. Ms. Bugle's observations were tongue-in-cheek, understated with sarcasm, and always barbed. She could always see "original sin" in people and institutions, habits and policies, having a keen set of eyes for pride (hubris), arrogance, ego-insecurity, greed, indulgence, and brokenness. You can imagine Hester Bugle, in her travels researching sin, never has a shortage of people and events to write about!

A second character is a "real" person. A 20th century student and teacher of the history of ideas and political philosophy, Isaiah Berlin was born in Latvia in 1909. His family moved to England when he was 11, and it was in England that he spent his career, dying in 1997. Fourteen years after the end of

World War II, Professor Berlin wrote a book advancing extended commentary related to the rise (and decline) of political movements in Europe, Asia, Africa, and other parts of the globe, “great ideological storms” he calls them on page 1 (“The Crooked Timber of Humanity,” 1959). On page 261, Professor Berlin observes that every group exercising power – whether capitalist or communist, authoritarian or democratic, secular or sectarian-religious – can take advantage of rivals and opponents by either repressing opponents if in power, or overthrowing opponents if attempting to gain power. Then he asks, essentially, how do we not “get this”? How do we not comprehend that bad behavior toward opponents sets in motion their resentment and your own group’s eventual demise at the hands of those your group has shunned? After asking, essentially, “How do we miss this?” he then concludes with seven words: “To this question, I volunteer no answer.”

Simeon and Anna both prayed and rejoiced before God, and they became two characters who are convinced early in the unfolding of the story of young Jesus’ life with his parents, that God’s light will shine through this Jesus, but with the same hardship on Jesus, Joseph, Mary, and others which can afflict anyone, who, on behalf of God’s people, stirs the water of the status quo politically, religiously, socially, and economically – as did adult Jesus. 700 years before Jesus (First Kings 18:17-18), King Ahab meets the prophet Elijah on a road. King Ahab says to Elijah: “Is it you, O troubler of Israel?” To which Elijah replies, “It is not I who have troubled Israel, but you have (O King), with your corruption.” 700 years after the prophet Elijah counter-commented to the King Ahab, Simeon and Anna here consider how trouble in the political, military, economic, and religious spheres is a given, but that God is faithful to see God’s people through, even by stirring up opposition to injustice and cruelty as a growing tree that (1) is humble at its roots and (2) is strong in its trunk and branches!

Here is the third character, a for-real person named Marla Frederick. Prof. Frederick has studied in the fields of anthropology and religion. She is author of “Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith” (2003). The book is a study of African-American women (and some men) in Halifax County, North Carolina, particularly in rural areas; and it’s about the everyday struggles which they face and attempt to negotiate and overcome – struggles of finances, faith, sexuality, household relationships, education, employment, health resources, safe water supplies, etc. Prof. Frederick writes: “On Sundays we attend worship and find: grace that heals the broken places; hope to enter the coming week; and strength to meet its challenges. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday all come together on Sunday . . . One of the women in that county has written: ‘The Sabbath allows us to mend our tattered lives and restore dignity to our souls . . . after a week of the body toiling away in inane work and the spirit often being assaulted with insult and loss . . .’” Then Prof. Frederick concludes: “Next week may be different (or not); difficulties may still arise, some new, some old . . . If nothing else, Sunday is a testimony of God’s ability to sustain life in the midst of trial. If Sunday provides us with the opportunity to reflect upon the week’s activities and inspire vision for the future, then let us not make this Sunday any different” (pgs.210-212).

Not much different from women in rural Halifax County, North Carolina fifteen years ago; and not much different from Brazos County, Texas, and all around the world on the threshold of 2018, Simeon and Anna prayed and watched and served to keep burning the light of God’s steadfast love. Baby Jesus would grow to be a young man in a world with lots of sin and lots of cruelty and lots of challenges, where we people ought to be able to figure out some aspects of sin and cruelty and their causes and complications, and yet where God draws near to change both individual lives and the relationships and communities of which our lives are a part, even when the relationships and communities extend beyond us. Hester Bugle can study sin until the cows come home tonight and until the sun comes up tomorrow, and God will still and always be drawing near for us to keep on serving while we keep on figuring out God’s kingdom coming to life everywhere God’s people are. – All honor and praise be to God.