

First Sunday of Christmas – December 30

What to do with this Sunday. The congregation and a bunch of visitors gathered on Christmas Eve a few days ago, perhaps a smaller crowd on Christmas morning. Together we celebrated the feast of the Nativity. Perhaps we lit a candle and sang *Silent Night*. We certainly sang some old favorite Christmas carols. Children who had not been seen in years showed up with their parents in the pews. If you are really traditional, you may have had a children's service that night. I sang in more than one of those.

But what is one to do with this day, the Sunday after what probably felt like an overdose of Church services? The Sunday cycle of worship is relentless, it is Sunday, God's people are gathered, they will come for fellowship, for the Sacrament, for the Word read, and the Word preached. And we have to have something to say. Chances are we will be tired. The faithful will be the ones there that day. They already know the story. The visiting relatives from afar probably won't come again. They are either on their way home or enjoying their holiday at home, unless they are the sorts of people who would have showed up today in their home towns in which case they are another form of the faithful.

I like to argue that these days should be days of serious preaching. The much smaller crowd who comes today is looking for Jesus. He has called them, they are responding to him. Today is a day to bring your faithful deep into the Word of God. They can handle it, they are the ones who already know the story so you don't really have to tell it again as if they were hearing it for the first time. They will be back next week too, so you don't have to worry about it if you are specific and narrowly focused.

Today the readings really offer us a number of important foci.

1. The humanity of Christ and its implications for us – Jesus was really a human being. That means he has united himself with me, and me with him. He has born my sinfulness, and imparted his very nature to me. Paul brings this out in the Epistle lesson. We are altogether too sloppy with our language in this regard. In truth, while there are many individual humans, all those individuals actually share in one humanity. We might say there are many humans, but that is linguistic slop. There is only one humanity. That humanity now includes God who has taken that singular humanity to himself. Because humanity is united to the second person of the Trinity, we are all united to the second person of the Trinity through our common humanity.
2. The Redemptive purpose of the Incarnation: The OT and Gospel readings note the sacrifice demanded of the parents of the first born son and then portray the event in Jesus life. This is strongly asserted – a life is demanded and in the economy of Salvation, Jesus is the life which God has offered up for our redemption.
3. The sacramental nature of God's work – we hear Simeon singing the *Nunc Dimittis*, which is one of the traditional post-communion canticles. This is a day to remember that

the one who took up flesh in the first Christmas is also in the flesh among us today, taking up residence in my flesh and blood through the sacramental meal of his flesh and blood. Just as Simeon saw the promises of God fulfilled, we taste them and join him in that same song of praise.

4. The value of human life. Today the OT reading notices the difference between the life of a child and that of an animal. The son is always redeemed. But on the other end of a spectrum of life, an old man and an old woman are integral to the telling of this story, they are valued as well. Humanity is important.

Obviously the preacher has choices to make today, don't try to preach all these things. You will simply overwhelm yourself and the good people God has brought to hear you. Pray about them, think about them, and write one good sermon. Remember, you will get another shot at this, God willing, next Christmas!

Collect of the Day

O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

God is both maker and redeemer, we are twice his.

First let's think about what creation means for our relationship with God. I like to make things. I have to admit, however, that I do not truly "make" something in the sense of create. All I can do is rearrange some materials into something which I may find either useful or beautiful. Even though I am not a true "creator," I have certain things which I can say about the thing I have made. If I, for instance, make a table in my workshop, I ostensibly own the table. I get to put it where I want it in my house. I get to say what it is used for, assuming that I have not given it as a gift. But I can give it as a gift too. If the table does not meet my expectations, I am perfectly within my rights to cut it up and use it for firewood.

Bring that now to the relationship which God has over us because he is creator. He gets to set the parameters and rules for my life. He owns me. He can give me away, he can keep me. If I don't measure up to his expectations, he can punish me, even destroy me, all this is perfectly within his "rights" as creator. As his creature, I really don't have a lot to say about this, except what he gives me to say. While, in the illustration I use above, the table is not likely to complain about my mistreatment of it, the fact remains that even if it could, I am still the 'maker' of the table and I get to do those things.

Does our whole problem with the environment really stem from a failure to recognize this fundamental reality? It seems that we are poisoning our planet. But is the problem there in the pronouns? Are we poisoning God's creation? If we truly believed that would we treat it differently? Every few years we hear about some climate conference in another city around the world. Is there an enormous amount of human arrogance in what we hear there? Do we simply

fail to recognize the creator? Do we imagine that we can care for it without his help? Do we think that the solutions lie in our hands and not his? This of course is compounded by the multiplicities of views here. This issue is important to many, but it doesn't seem to get translated into real results. We talk a lot, there is much head nodding, but we all seem to jump back into our SUV and drive off at the end of the day and little or nothing changes. Could this be a possible point of connection for the people who are hearing us?

This whole question gets much more complex because of our sloppy use of language. I use the possessive to describe all sorts of relationships, including "my son" or "my wife" etc. That relational use of the word can muddy this water considerably. I don't own my wife and children in the same way I own my socks, at least I hope and pray that I don't. That relationship is much deeper and more complex than that. Even the parent of an infant does not have the unconditional rights of someone who has made a piece of furniture or created a painting.

This has led to a great deal of confusion about the whole issue of God's role in the relationship. I am personally of the opinion, and I think that the Bible supports this, that when Moses asserts God's creative role, he is making some powerful statements about God. In calling us creatures, Moses is asserting that God has the right both to make the rules which govern our life and the right to expect us to keep them. I am much more akin to a table than a child of God in that respect. Does that frighten me? Yes! Should it? Of course, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

But the prayer goes on to say more about God than is role as creator. He has "restored our human nature." That which was created in the image of God has been terribly disfigured by sin, beyond even a recognition as human. We say "to err is human" but it is not really, especially when we almost always apply the phrase to sinful behavior. It is not our human nature, it is the brokenness of our human nature. Our world often sees religion and adherence to a creed or faith as somehow a diminution of the human spirit, a lessening of our humanity, but the prayer is actually asserting that the presence of Christ makes us more human. As Paul says, we are truly free when we are enslaved to Christ.

The preacher in Christmas loses the language of the future and subjunctive (Advent language) and replaces that with the language of the present indicative. This is sinner and saint reality. Christmas will focus on the saint part of that statement. Yes, the sinner remains, but so too is the saint whom God has created. The person sitting next to me, the people whom I see in the pews before me are saints. They are saints because God has baptized them, because Jesus has forgiven them, because the Holy Spirit has sanctified them. The Christmas season will be a time to speak to that other half of the statement. Advent was the moment to talk to the sinner. Now it is time to talk to the saint. Don't treat them like sinners today, treat them like saints.

What is the element of human nature that has already been restored? I can point to my very existence and see my creation. What about my human nature has been transformed/restored by the incarnation of Christ? This is hard. Is there something I can point to as an illustration? I think the fact that religious people are demonstrably, on average, more generous than non-

religious people speaks to the fact that being connected to Christ substantively restores somewhat my human nature. Is it enough to convince a skeptic? No, but it is an argument worth making.

We speak this prayer to the one who sees us as restored. Is this simply a process of seeing myself in God's eyes? Is this really a profound expression of faith in what God has done? Despite what I see, does this prayer insist on seeing me through the eyes of Jesus, the eyes of faith? Is faith really the restored human nature? Is the gift of that trusting relationship in Christ in which I am simply his child, he is my God, He loves me, and I trust him, is that the restored human being which was shattered by Eden's fall? I think so. It may in fact be perilous for the preacher to point to something that the world and I can see. The extremely sensitive hypocrisy meters which most people operate will be looking for some reason to point a finger at us and say "ha!" The different thing in my life is that I call Him 'Father' and He hears me, like a dear father listens to his dear children. The humanity we lost in Eden's fall was really the relationship with the one who made us, the "garden stroll in the cool of the day."

It might be a good time to take stock of the past year and ask where Christ was seen in our lives. This is a good idea only if there are a few places to point to. Did you feed the hungry? Did you care for the folks in need? Did you comfort the grieving, did you care for the sick? Did you forgive the sinners and declare the kingdom of God? Jesus was in that doing. Celebrate that. This is the saintliness of which we spoke above.

Secondly, God has established another relationship with us through the redemptive work of his Son. Perhaps it would be better to say that this is actually the original relationship restored. We tend to limit our use of the word redeem to something that happens in the grocery store with double coupon Tuesdays or something like that. But even in that mercantile use of the word redeem, we don't really understand the concept. In truth, it is the merchant or the manufacturer who redeems the coupon, we do not. We do not buy coupons back, they do.

The origin of the word was much more significant than the acquisition of Cheerios and Raisin Bran. It used to be that bankruptcy involved the selling of one's possessions to pay debts, much like a business that goes bankrupt will be liquidated today. But if that did not satisfy the creditors, they would sell you into slavery. In that situation your cousin or friend could come down to the slave market and "buy you back" from the creditors who had a lien against your very life. That is what it meant to be "redeemed"

That does rather make more sense of all the "Redeemer Lutheran" Churches which dot the American landscape. I always wonder if the people walking through the doors of such congregations really understand this is much more significant than the little money saving slips of paper that come in their newspapers. I wonder if they ever think about redeeming a slave from sub-Saharan Africa or something like that because they are "Redeemer Lutheran."

Jesus, has with his incarnation, suffering, death, resurrection and ascension, bought us back from the clutches of a thoroughly greedy and merciless creditor – Satan, who employs his evil collector, Death, who demands our very life. In the meantime he has bound our lives in his Sin so

that we are trapped in his devices. Like some poor coal miner in a company town who discovers that the prices in the company store are always more than this paycheck, we toil in an impossible situation. From this Christ has redeemed us, more wondrous even than the creation itself. For this second relationship really is like that of my wife, my children, my friend, etc.

We pray in this prayer simply that we may live this reality. We want to be alive in him who made us to be like himself, through his great sacrifice of becoming like us in our dying humanity so that we might become like him in his holiness and eternity of life.

Readings

Exodus 13:1-3a, 11-15

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

³ Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place. No leavened bread shall be eaten. ⁴ Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. ⁵ And when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this service in this month. ⁶ Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. ⁷ Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen with you, and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory. ⁸ You shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ ⁹ And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the LORD has brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰ You shall therefore keep this statute at its appointed time from year to year.

¹¹ “When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, ¹² you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's. ¹³ Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. ¹⁴ And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵ For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’ ¹⁶ It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.”

If you have not read the comments on the collect of the day, and I know that some of you skip those, you want to read them first. This text is built upon God the Creator establishing his “ownership” rights over his people in brutal terms. The first born all belong to him, period. Their lives must be redeemed with the shedding of blood, lots of blood. A lamb was a serious

sacrifice to make. Every first born calf, lamb, chicken, etc, was to be sacrificed. Larger animals could be redeemed with the death of another lamb, presumably not a first born lamb.

This is a pretty serious commitment to ask for, but God is perfectly within his rights to make a claim on my first born child. We use this as something of an idiom for the unreasonable demand. The preacher who preaches this text today may do well simply to say that while it is unreasonable for anyone else, it is not unreasonable for God to ask this, in fact it is downright generous. By rights he could claim them all and you too.

Of course the preacher will also notice something else. The first born son is not to be sacrificed, but a lamb is to be sacrificed in his place, redeeming him from the sacrificial knife, the cruel clutches of death. No Christian can read that without seeing Christ written large there. Jesus is the lamb who died in the place of that first born son, of every son and every daughter, of every man and every woman. If you want to read an excellent little reflection on this from a slightly different angle, consider this brief article on the First Things website:

<http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2015/12/davids-sin-davids-son>

This passage actually does some really important things. It is very vogue right now to critique God according to human standards. Like Marcion of the second century, many read in the Old Testament and find the Lord who sends out an angel of death to claim the lives of the first born children of Egypt to be simply too cruel. Likewise the Lord who tells Joshua to slay every Canaanite, their animals, their whole culture, sounds like a monster to us.

But that complaint is rooted in a relationship with God which is simply not borne out by a reading of Scripture faithfully. The truth is that the Lord has that right, and more. As creator he could demand it all. This passage asserts God's claim over our very lives. The old sinner within will be quite uncomfortable with that claim, let him be uncomfortable. Remember that this is the week we have the faithful, they can take it. Don't feel the need to sugar coat this lest you drive away the casual attendee. They all came Monday evening and won't be back until sometime in January at the earliest. This is a time to strengthen the faithful.

Of course, the hard word which makes the old man uncomfortable is also accompanied by a sweet word of God's Gospel action. He has sent the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world. Today we get to join Simeon in singing his praise, the praise of a first born Son whom God did not withhold and in whose place no one else died. The claim which God has upon us now, is not only the claim of the creator, but also the claim of the redeemer.

Another theme the preacher might want to hit here is trust. Is this God really creating and exercising the people in a trust relationship with him? The simple farmer whose ewe finally bears a male lamb, he has to trust that God will make that happen again, if he is to sacrifice this first born. This seems to be God operating within a trust relationship.

Psalm 111

Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

² Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

³ Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴ He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.

⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy;

⁸ they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name!

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever!

I cited the final verse of this psalm earlier, so you might want to use this psalm to bring this idea into the mix. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, but it is not the end of wisdom. The end of wisdom is the love of the LORD. For the Lord is “gracious and merciful” (vs. 4) and his righteousness endures forever (vs 3). The psalm is really a catalogue of the various ways in which God has through providential creation and loving redemption made us his own people.

Colossians 3:12-17

¹ If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

¹⁸ *Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.* ¹⁹ *Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.* ²⁰ *Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.* ²¹ *Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged.* ²² *Bondservants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord.* ²³ *Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,* ²⁴ *knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.* ²⁵ *For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.*

My predilection for context may be getting excessive, but I find this passage sits inside a larger argument and the preacher will do well to pay attention to it. Paul is in what exegetes usually refer to as the paraenesis of the letter. This is the part where he exhorts people to live a certain way. The first line of this is really important. Paul asserts that they are already chosen, holy, and beloved. Out of context, Paul's words become legalistic. The "putting on" which Paul describes here is predicated upon the fact that Christ, who is in us now, is being revealed. I have included the last section of the chapter as well so that we can see that Paul is not only speaking in generalities but also in specifics. Husbands, wives, children, and others all express this Christ-within.

The collect of the day asks that we may ever live in him who made us to be like himself. This passage is really describing that last part of the prayer. This is what it means in real terms to be a child of God in this place, redeemed by the blood of Christ.

It means that we have put something on ourselves which did not belong to us, but which has been given us, the very nature of Christ. Not only has he taken our sins from us, but he has replaced our old sinful nature with his own perfect obedience and heavenly, holy love. That means we start out being the God's chosen people, holy and beloved because he has made us to be so in Christ. He has given us a compassionate heart which is filled with kindness, humility, meekness and patience. These are gifts from him, not virtues we gin up, but gifts which grow within us by his work, his nurture, and his gracious giving.

Those gifts then result in a number of things showing up in the living of our lives. We bear with one another in a patient love and forgive the one who has the fault. We can do that because Christ has empowered us to do that by forgiving us. Above all, we love, and that love is what

binds us together, not congregational constitutions and bylaws, nor covenants and relationships of power, but love.

This in turn results in two very good things being present, the peace of Christ and thanksgiving. These go hand in hand. Christ has established peace with God and peace with one another by his death on the cross. That means I can be thankful in any situation, indeed, they are in a rather close and mutually reinforcing relationship with each other. The more I am thankful, the more I will experience the peace, that peace in turn feeds the thankfulness, and so forth.

The Word of Christ dwells in us richly. This is not just the recitation of biblical passages, although that is certainly not a bad thing. This is that Christ's words become our preferred formulations for solving problems. His words of blessing, admonition, mission, and especially love become the vision statements, value set, mission statements, and tactics for the living of my life. God's Word fills me with a song. It is the word of encouragement which I have for my neighbor, as well as the word of advice.

The result is that my whole life, word and deed, is filled with Jesus and an act of praise to God. When I speak, he speaks through me.

This passage is a description of what Christ came to that manger to create. This is the life he redeemed. This is the life he gives to you.

The preacher will want to be aware that the person hearing this is liable to a particularly vicious form of the law. You will be describing this beautiful thing, but in the back of his or her mind, your hearer will have this evil little voice pointing out the fact that "I have not lived this at all." If that nasty little voice gets a little traction, he will always work the angle that this means you are not really a child of God and seek to cast doubt on the validity of the word, the efficacy of the work of Christ, the reality of your relationship with God through Jesus. The preacher will really need, therefore, to hit the first part of this passage more than once. This is all predicated upon what God has done, not your life, but his life given and his blood which he shed in redemptive sacrifice for you.

As he steers between the rocky shoals of preaching a life which doesn't matter and the life which buys salvation with good works, the preacher will do well to remember this: The Christian cannot be more beloved, more chosen, more holy. Those are yes or no sorts of things. But we can be more compassionate, more kind, more gentle, etc. This all gets brought back to the crux in the end of 13 when the text speaks of forgiving, we must forgive, not because we have some burden laid upon us, but because God has remade us, he has refashioned us, he has restored our fallen human nature. I may be much happier as a forgiver, but it is critical for the preacher to remember that the empowerment for that forgiveness comes from Christ's forgiveness of us. Yes, we are much happier when we forgive, and that is also a reason to forgive, but ultimately it is an insufficient reason to forgive. The ability to forgive, indeed the desire to forgive, flows from his work in our hearts.

We might use the common illustration of an apple tree. It naturally produces fruit. It does not struggle to choose which fruit to produce, it does not think to itself that it would be nice to make

an apple today. It just does it. Notice the “must forgive.” Necessity takes a number of forms, and this necessity seems to be something which flows from the very being. The formula of concord speaks of the deeds of a “free and merry spirit.” Coercion can never get that spirit to be free and merry. Only love can build that.

Notice then how this text starts piling on. Once the person is changed into a forgiver of sins, that forgiveness wells up inside him or her. We now struggle to express it. We know we want to forgive, we know we want to do this, but we often fall short. But Paul paints a picture here of a person who is unleashed by this life.

This all returns to the fact that we are beloved, we are holy, we are chosen by God. In so far as we doubt or mis-believe these things, we will indeed find this forgiveness not merely difficult but impossible. This begins with the proclamation of how God sees us. If that piece is missing this whole sermon becomes a terrible demand, more horrible than God’s demand for the first born in the Exodus text. But as the children of God, beloved, chosen and holy, this is not God demanding something of us, but God describing the life he has given us in the Incarnate Word Jesus, the life which grows toward that heavenly reality, but which is now a reality in our relationships and families and church, even if imperfectly expressed. We are holey – having holes in our lives, still works in progress, we are holy because we are wholly loved by him.

Luke 2:22-40

²¹ *And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*

²² *And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”*

²⁵ *Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,*

²⁹ *“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;*

³⁰ *for my eyes have seen your salvation*

³¹ *that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,*

³² *a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”*

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

The preacher who is drawn to the Gospel lesson today has a number of wonderful options before him.

Jesus comes in fulfillment to the Law. It is too easy for Christians to lapse into a latent form of Gnosticism which suggests that Jesus was a human being only in appearance. He was not really tempted, did not really suffer, etc. Luke will simply not allow for that. Jesus comes under the Law (Galatians 4:4-5), his life is redeemed from the same obligation which has governed the Israelite people from the days of Moses. He is fully human in this. He is subject to the same rules and the same creature relationship in which we exist. He is fully human. This is important because if he is not, your forgiveness and redemption in the cross are in doubt. This is the point at the end of the reading in which he carefully notices that Jesus grows, in wisdom and stature. He is not some Athena who springs full grown from the head of Zeus. He is a real child, thus sanctifying the childhood which all of us share. He is a real human being, thus making holy our humanity. If we make him either less human or more than human, we have missed the mark.

The preacher will also want to highlight that this peculiar element of the Law of Moses, this strange and arbitrary rule was designed for this very moment. It all pointed ahead to the fact that this child would not be redeemed on a spring day some thirty years later when God would instead offer him as the redemption of the whole world, the lamb who takes away the sin of the whole world. Every lamb sacrificed by Jewish families to redeem the first born son of their family was a large arrow pointing to this baby, to this child.

Simeon really sees that arrow, reads the sign, and notices what that Torah has been pointing toward. Moved by the Spirit, one of the signature phrases of Luke, he takes the child in his arms and offers up the song we often call the Nunc Dimittis. The title is simply the first two words of the song in Latin. He has seen the salvation of God in this child. The sacrifices of 300 generations of Jews have all been fulfilled in this young couple bringing this child to this ritual, 40 days after his birth. Notice as well the universality of this significance. This is important not only for the Jews, but also for the gentiles. This child is of a cosmic significance.

The preacher of a congregation which has maintained the liturgical singing of the Nunc Dimittis, will probably want to hit that point. We sing this after we ourselves have physically experienced the salvation of God in the Sacrament of the Altar. Simeon saw, we taste, but it is the same thing he saw what we taste and eat, the same Jesus, the same salvation of the whole world, the light to the gentiles, the glory of his people. That Jesus brings us the same joy.

You might also want to play the poverty issue. Jesus was born to poor parents. Mary and Joseph cannot afford the lamb and the Law stipulated that those too poor to afford a lamb could substitute a pair of doves for the lamb. But they were not destitute; the destitute could substitute a handful of flour.

After Simeon comes Anna. She also marvels at the birth of the child under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. She goes about Jerusalem telling all who would hear that something momentous has taken place.

There are a couple of things for the preacher in here. First of all, some excellent storytelling and effect can be achieved by juxtaposing the age of the people involved. Many of our congregants on this day will be elderly. This Sunday really is about God's inclusion of them. Many elderly people feel that their life is spent. Our youth culture often wants to put the elderly out of sight in some sort of a nursing home, or at least make sure that they are not a bother. These are a pair of elderly people whose praise is integral to the story.

You also can play the lost people up here. Anna is of the tribe of Asher, one of the lost ten tribes. She is the only member of that tribe ever to be mentioned after the fall of Samaria in 712 BC. God had not forgotten his lost people. This will be one of the themes Luke will pick up later in his book, especially chapter 15.

Here are two poor people, two old people, and an infant, standing on the portico of the temple. The world is rushing by, the temple was a busy place. There were many important people busily about doing important things. But here in this little tableau, these marginalized and unimportant people were the only ones who recognized the most important thing in all the universe. Does this describe our congregations? The world rushes by, doing its busy thing, but we are stopped on a Sunday, a few moments after Christmas, and we are gathered around the one important thing in all the universe. A mouthful of bread and wine, a word of forgiveness, and the fellowship of our congregants is the very center of the world. That could preach.

Law

1. God has a claim over me. He has every right to it, and deep down inside me, I hate it. I love the idea of my autonomous self-making decisions and being in some control of my own destiny and fate.
2. God's claim, however, is absolute, he made me, and therefore I am his. If I deny the creation and think that this relieves me from his demand, I cannot deny death and the consequences of this broken world.

3. What is worse, my persistent rebellion against God and his righteous claim over me has born miserable fruit. The days which follow Christmas are blue for many people as they look at the empty boxes and piles of wrapping paper, and realize that the stuff is not life, and I have invested in the meaningless stuff and it is as empty as the boxes which I haul out to the curb to be recycled.
4. That miserable fruit makes my life valueless, especially as I grow older. The world is a youth culture and I am over the hill, tolerated as long as I am not too much trouble, perhaps even valued, as long as I can contribute, but that is the measure of my being. The day will come when some new gadget comes out and I don't know how to use it and I won't care. The world will pass me by.
5. My life lacks thanksgiving, joy, peace, and harmony. I want it, but I don't know how to achieve these things. They seem so elusive to me.

Gospel

1. God has a double claim over me. Yes, the claim of creation is absolute and a terrible thing, but he has also established a claim over me in the redemption which this Christmas child worked in his cross. That claim he has re-established in sacraments and word.
2. Now, because this baby Jesus has submitted to the law in my place, because he has born its weight, I am promised that death is not the end, but only the gateway to eternal life. The brokenness of the world serves now to remind me of the redemptive act of God. This Jesus is the solution to all these problems.
3. In this he transforms my life, not taking away the things which used to be my idols, but returning them to me to be used to his glory and praise, as they were meant all along. Yes, my new 50" LCD wide screen TV can be an instrument by which I praise God, and that doesn't mean it always has to be tuned to religious broadcasting. The enjoyment of time spent with family simply having fun with something is a blessing from God.
4. This valuation of life in him gives me also a complete reevaluation of my life. I am no longer estimated on the basis of my productivity, beauty, or abilities, but as a child of God he always delights in me because of what Christ has done.
5. By taking on the flesh of this humanity, He has made me his holy child, his beloved. He has taken my sin to himself and bestowed upon me his very nature. Now he has planted compassion and peace, thanksgiving, joy and much more in this new heart of mine. It is not a magic bullet by which I am transformed like in some fairy tale, but much better, the steady and deep-rooted growth of a life that sunk a root down into the baptismal waters of heaven, that is schooled in the manners of his kingdom at his table, that grows into the person he has called me to be under his fatherly attention.

Sermon Ideas

1. Redeemed (OT, Epistle, and Gospel – That the Spirit of God would push the hearer out of the pew and into life as a new person, bought back from sin, death, and devil to be a witness to Christ’s love.)

The OT speaks of a first-born son redeemed. The first born animals were sacrificed but children were redeemed, bought back with a lamb. If the couple were poor, they could bring a smaller gift. That is what Mary and Joseph are doing in the temple in the Gospel reading today. They are redeeming Jesus.

But this is not a day of just remember religious events of the past. This infant whom Mary and Joseph redeem is none other than the Redeemer himself, the one whose death upon a cross on a spring day decades later will liberate all humanity from slavery to sin, death, and devil. Galatians 4:4-5 might be a good quote. God did not redeem his son, but spent him as the redemption price. Jesus taking humanity to himself and showing up as a helpless infant in the temple in Mary’s arms is just the first step on a journey that ends on a cross and cosmic redemption.

The point of the sermon is to put the hearer into the position of the slave who has been redeemed. Standing on the slave auction block, looking out over the whole crowd of wealthy slave buyers, he catches sight of his friend who has come to pay the price for him and set him free.

Can you imagine the life that follows such an act? Such a life would be filled with song – Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis* in fact. We have seen the salvation of our God with our eyes. Joy has to be the first response.

But every day would be lived as a new day, a gift, precious.

This homily could simply send us out with joy, but that would not be where I would go with this, at least not the only place. The joyful life which flows out of that will start to take on a shape. Paul starts describing that for us. You might look at the next sermon for a few ideas about that.

This sermon could be a great outreach sermon. Remember, the folks who are here this day will be the old faithful’s, the folks who are the core of your congregation. This sermon will need to remember that Paul’s list of the virtues is built on the statements of who we are. We are beloved, holy, and precious to God. What flows out of our lips and lives is built on that fact. The old enemy will constantly want to turn that into a buy/sell sort of thing. Speak clearly and do not let that happen as much as you can. Speak of gifts given, of love bestowed, of a reality which is true because of this infant.

But that reality of the infant means that our lives are changed, are transformed in Christ. We are no longer the old people who just bustled by the Christ child that day. We are stopping to join this tableau. We are hearing Simeon’s words and singing with him. Like Anna we will speak of this to neighbors and others. For Jesus has come. Jesus has lived. Jesus has died, and Jesus has risen again!

Angels and archangels and all the company of heaven are looking down on this gospel scene, marveling. They have witnessed their Lord descending to humanity. They must have been shocked to see that only a couple of old people noticed Jesus coming to his temple that day. We never walk out of these doors alone, but are always in the presence of Jesus and his whole host. This could be a way to turn life into something more than the mundane, to break the tyranny of “busy-ness” which so often dictates what we say and do.

Anna and Simeon probably thought their lives were over and done with. They were old, worn out people. Simeon is apparently ready to check out. But for the last two thousand years they have borne witness to the Christ-child in the temple. Who would have known that morning when he woke up that in two thousand years millions of people would be singing his song that he composed on the spot that day. Can we walk out of this church today with that sort of expectation and hope? God may be doing something great with my life too. We have put on Christ, after all. We have not put on another self-help regime or some fad. We have put on Christ – that makes our lives filled with potential.

2. Dressed in Christ’s life (Epistle - That the hearer would believe that Christ has taken to himself our sinful humanity to be borne upon a cross, but that he has also bestowed upon us his own perfect and beautiful life – literally dressing us in his own virtue.)

If you have an old jacket which you have outgrown, you might use it as an illustration of the old life which just does not fit anymore.

This sermon will draw extensively on the epistle lesson appointed for the day and may simply want to unpack that dense little passage. But as we noted above, the preacher will need to be careful here. Any time we describe the perfect life which Christ has given us, our enemy will point to our failings and accuse us. We may be trying to preach something beautiful, but the poor sinner in the pew can only see it as a mirror which shows me my failings. So the preacher must emphasize the statement at the front end of this passage in which Paul calls us holy and beloved, that is what we are in Christ. We don’t become this by putting all this on. We are already holy and beloved, and that holiness and relationship of love is what gives us to put on this life of Christ. The image here is of putting on a garment, an article of clothing. But the uniform does not make the policeman; rather, the policeman, when deemed fit and sworn into the office, is allowed to don the uniform. The preacher might want to talk about how that works in our lives. At the same time, wearing the uniform often does change the way we act. Schools which have instituted a uniform have noticed fewer discipline problems; professional dress makes a difference, etc.

This is a serious sermon for the faithful. Christ’s incarnation makes a difference for the living of life. One tendency of our Lutheran theology is to discount human works; after all they do not merit heaven. But that is not what this means at all. His entrance into the human race means that the things we do are not less important but more important. Jesus

has father and mother, siblings, friends, and co-workers. Because he has those relationships, now our relationships are sanctified, they are important in the eyes of God and the way that we live in those relationships is even more important to God. Jesus had a childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, he died, and he endured suffering and pain. That means that our childhood, our adulthood and adolescence are rendered holy by his presence in those same things.

The law development here will likely want to note that the old life is not comfortable; it doesn't fit me anymore now that Christ has remade me. That old life doesn't fit me, it is miserable. Why do I keep trying to put that thing back on? My son won't get rid of a pair of shoes which he has outgrown. It is just part of our human nature, I think. But God has restored our human nature. Now he has given us a new shape, and given us a new garment to wear.

We think of ourselves and still see a 32 inch waist. Our self-image is really what we are talking about here. Will God define us or will we? God has defined us as his holy, chosen, and beloved children. Today we simply proclaim what Christ sees, we need to hear that again and again. Our human nature and the rest of the world really work hard to remind us that we are an old stinker, just another dying human being whose end is a grave. But God doesn't see that anymore. The old is gone, the new has come.

3. My own eyes have seen... (That the hearer would delight and rejoice in God and his salvation for his/her eyes to see, tongues to taste, and ears to hear and lastly join in Simeon's song with Christians of every age.)

We sing this Nunc Dimittis regularly, but does it really transport us to Christmas when we do it? Advent has been all about the Not-yet-ness of our faith, Christmas is about the Now-ness of our faith. When we come to the sacrament we come to a reality, to a promise fulfilled. We do not walk away from the rail with a promissory note in hand, but with cash, to use a banking metaphor. Our eyes have seen the very salvation of God in this, our tongues have tasted the forgiveness of sins made tasty. We have, with our senses, experienced the presence, the love, and the favor of God.

This sermon equips the hearer to bring Christmas joy into the whole of the year, as they experience the sacrament and remember that this is an incarnation moment. It also has the ability to bring the rootedness and stability of the sacramental act to the festival of Christmas, which too often is about flighty and transient things in our culture.

I envision this sermon simply being a mediation upon the Nunc Dimittis. You might want to bring in the unlikely cast of characters that gathered at the temple that day. All the players were societally peripheral. An infant, a poor young couple, two elderly, doddering religious types all combine into one beautiful scene, but probably something that essentially happened in the narthex, not where people expected the great event to take place.

Simeon is ready to go. Let your servant depart in peace. He is ready to die. His life has been made complete by this sight. God has kept the promise he made in his Word. We leave the rail, at peace with God, united with him. Death holds no terror for us anymore, but is simply what it is. We are at peace with God. He has kept his promise.

Simeon's eyes saw the salvation of God, his arms held him, his ears heard his cry. The child he held in his arms was the promised messiah who had occupied the scriptural story since Adam and Eve's fall into Sin and God's promise of a Seed who would crush Satan's head. But notice, this is the infant Jesus whom he holds in his hands. There is still much to be done, but Simeon is at peace. Likewise when we partake of the Supper, we are not in the heavenly consummation and the eternal feast in all its fat and smooth wines. The infant would grow to adulthood and bear the sins of the world, die a cruel death, etc. Simeon saw none of that, he held an infant in his arms. We partake of a foretaste of the feast to come, it is not yet complete, we have it in hand and yet look forward to more. The appetizer is real food, it really feeds, and likewise we partake of God's salvation in this feast, though it too looks forward.

Simeon's song then speaks of the scope of this salvation, it is for all, the whole world, Jew and Gentile alike. We can probably think of something to do with that, and perhaps we will talk more about it on Tuesday.

4. "And he became man..." (Creed - That the hearer, acutely aware of his/her failings as a human being, would turn their eyes to One who has fulfilled humanity)

This past week we have celebrated the Festival of the Incarnation, but the Incarnation is a great mystery before which we could stand for 10,000 years and never plumb its depths. It is just too deep and large for us to ever comprehend. That said, however, the prayerful, faithful, and worshipful consideration of the Incarnation yields much to the man or woman who takes the time. Thus the liturgical season actually gives us 12 days every year just to consider this great mystery. This sermon wants to take a little of that time and invest it in the beautiful thing which God has done.

The Logos, the second person of the Trinity, has become a man, a real man, not a hologram or a fake man, not a representation of a man, but real, flesh and blood man. In fact, it is only by this great action on his part of taking up humanity to himself that we can even talk about a second person of the Trinity. Apart from this redemptive work of Christ, we can only speak of "God" as some great and mysterious being who transcends us.

But from the beginning God created us for a relationship with himself. Sin has spoilt that. We would all be cowering behind a bush in abject terror to this day. Indeed, we often remain so afraid of death and meeting that maker face to face, that we either deny his reality or pretend we shall not die. Deep down we all know that when we stand naked before his unfathomable gaze, we will all be looking for a bush to hide behind, foolish as it really is.

But God's good and gracious will is not that we hide behind that bush or flee him in terror and ultimately to our destruction. God would restore the evening walks in the cool of the day with his creature that he enjoyed with Adam before the fall. I cannot fathom the ways that God could do restore that relationship, but I can bear witness to the one way that he did do that. He sent himself, the second person of that Trinity, to be born of a virgin, live the life of a carpenter's son, to preach, to heal, to die, and rise again. The Incarnation presents us with the good news that God has come into the flesh to be our God.

For we cannot love some distant thing, not really. The mysteries of the divine essence, his power, his glory, his majesty are simply beyond us. If we see them we are reduced to that cowering fool behind the bush. So God has come to us, not in power and glory but in humility and gentleness. He has taken up humanity to himself. (Use this formula precisely – other ways of saying this lend to problematic conclusions.) We are talking about our humanity, the thing we all share as human beings. There is one of us, now, who is not broken by sin. There is one of us now who lives in that perfect relationship with the Father and Creator. It can be done. It is done.

But this is more than just an aspirational hope for us now. Christ in taking that humanity to himself has brought his divinity into humanity as well. From this manger and stable and humble life he will walk a peculiar path to a hill outside of Jerusalem's walls where he will spend this life in willing sacrificial death. The first born Son of God will not be redeemed on that day, but he will redeem.

The death of another Jewish peasant by the Romans would not even merit a footnote in history. They killed thousands upon thousands in their cruel system of inhumane injustice. But this was not just another peasant because this is not just another child born into third-world poverty and laid in a feeding trough because there was no room for his family at the inn. This one who died that death is also the one who called light and earth and everything into being. God did that with a word, this Word that is lying humbly in a manger.

And so when he died that death, it was not just another peasant. It was God. And that death and his resurrection to human life is now like some great explosion whose shock wave expands even to this day. Jesus has given his life to us. That is what Paul talks about in the Epistle lesson. With every person baptized into that kingdom, He restores the life which was lost in a garden long ago. It is good to stand here and just think about that. Better, to believe it and turn in praise to God for it.