

CHRISTMAS: A TIME FOR SHARING TIDINGS OF JOY

First Sunday after Christmas

January 1, 2012

Isaiah 61:10—62:3

Psalm 148

Galatians 4:4-7

Luke 2:22-40

Blessing in the Midst of the Ordinary

Slowly read the Gospel text for this week: Luke 2:22-40. It is obvious that the reactions of Simeon and Anna are certainly the highlights of this particular reading. The words of blessing and praise capture their joyful enthusiasm of meeting Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah.

But notice the context, the reason Joseph and Mary were there in the first place. They were simply doing what was required of them – to bring the child to the temple in order to present Jesus to God *and* to perform the purification required of Mary after giving birth. These rites of dedication and purification were significant ones according to the Law of Moses. They were rituals required of the people of God.

Rituals, it has been observed, are moments when the sacred intersects the ordinary. They bring the notion of the sacred into the routines of everyday life. Joseph and Mary were there simply doing what was required of them. Little did they know that their rituals provided the stage on which Simeon and Anna acted out their own rituals of blessing and praise. What a shocking surprise it must have been for these new parents to hear such expressions of joy at meeting their child, Jesus.

Sometimes we experience such moments of blessing in the ordinariness of life. Others times, however, we could...but we are so preoccupied with the busy trivialities of life that we forget to stay tuned to the unexpected, to the possible breakthroughs of true joy, praise, and blessing in the midst of our rituals and routines.

Christmas and the season of Christmas are about these unexpected joys – seeing friends and family outside of the normal constraints of life, receiving gifts and tokens of love and gratitude "just because," living temporarily within a sacred and special time. As we move beyond these sacred rituals to ordinary time, let us be intentional about bringing the sacred with us back into the day-to-day experiences of living.

Let the obedience of Joseph and Mary, in carrying out their ritual, challenge us to remain obedient, faithful, and conscious of God's kindness to us...and God's ability to surprise us with moments of blessing in the midst of the ordinary. The experience of receiving a blessing in the

predictability of life is indeed special. But the ability to remain thankful for moments of blessing when they are not visible is surely a sacred ritual to practice.

This week's reflection was prepared by Steve Berneking, Ph.D., who serves on the staff of the American Bible Society as Senior Manager of the Translation Unit in the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship.

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This week we remember to pray for the work of the Bible Societies in: Cameroon – with thanks to God for the 50 year celebration of Bible work in this region; and with prayers that the churches and Christians who participated will continue to show interest and support the work of the Society; also pray that the holistic programs will have greater impact on the lives of the beneficiaries, that the Annual General Meeting scheduled for February will go well, and for the opening of depots in **Equatorial Guinea** and **São Tomé and Príncipe; Central African Republic** – with thanks to God for significant improvement in the Society's relations with churches and Christian organizations and for the resolution of the compensation claim relating to the government's demolition of the Bible House; and with prayers for the *Faith Comes by Hearing (FCBH)* program, for the literacy work, for the ministry to those in crisis, and for the purchase of a distribution vehicle as well as land on which to build an office; **Gabon** – with thanks to God for opportunities for Bible work in this region and for support received from Christian communities and individual Christians; and with prayers for the impact of the holistic programs, for God's guidance as the Society develops Bible work and plans the construction of a Bible House, and for the opening of new depots in the interior of the country.

Activity Corner: "Blessing Basket"

Supplies needed: Bible; candle; 3" x 5" index cards (or pieces of paper); drawing paper and crayons for young children; pens or pencils; basket (or bowl).

Light a candle and read together Simeon's song of praise (Luke 2:29-32) and Anna's testimony (Luke 2:36-38). What brought Simeon joy? What did Anna say about Jesus? Invite everyone to reflect on a blessing they have received "in the midst of the ordinary" and to write it down on an index card or piece of paper. (Young children may be encouraged to draw a picture.) Gather everyone's "blessing" in a basket. Each day during the week, incorporate these blessings into a prayer of thanksgiving. Conclude by reading together Psalm 148, a psalm that praises God's universal glory.