

SERMON TITLE: "A Little Child Shall Lead Them: A Child Who Brought Salvation"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 2:22-40
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 27, 2020, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday morning, I assisted Bill Tibbitts of Crossroads Urban Center in the release of a new report on child homelessness in Weber County. In our Facebook Live presentation, Bill gave recent-year statistics and some data about the effects of homelessness on children. I gave my own testimony about adopting two children who had been homeless in their early years, and the lasting trauma and difficulties that their homelessness has caused. Along with our report of the problem, Bill also gave four recommendations for Weber County. The hope is that our County Commissioners, state legislators, and school district leaders were listening. The hope is that many caring citizens will print out this report and hold our public servants accountable for offering a form of salvation for our children.

Throughout this month of September, we here at First UMC have been focusing our attention on the theme of "A Little Child Shall Lead Them." This idea comes from Isaiah 11:6, in the prophet Isaiah's vision of God's peaceable kingdom. God's kingdom, which is the ideal for all of society, is one in which children are valued and cared for. God's kingdom is a place where children's voices are heard and their needs are given priority--for that's how a little child shall lead us.

Over the past weeks, we have read the Old Testament stories of a boy who heard God's voice, a girl who offered God's help, and a boy who could speak for God. Today, we have moved into the New Testament, where the Gospel of Luke tells of baby Jesus, taken to the temple for his presentation to the Lord. Let's see how each of the characters in this story affirms that Jesus was "a child who brought salvation."

1--SIMEON

We'll begin with Simeon. Luke 2:25-35 tells us that Simeon lived in Jerusalem and was at the Jewish temple when Mary and Joseph arrived there with baby Jesus. We see that Simeon was righteous

and devout, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The verses don't tell us how old Simeon was, but artists have depicted him as elderly, since the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that "he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah." Upon seeing baby Jesus, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation."

From the other words Simeon says, we can tell that his idea of salvation was not a gentle nudge or an individual change of heart. Simeon's understanding of salvation was that it would affect the whole society, so that the lowly would rise up and the mighty would fall. His words echo the song of Mary in Luke 1:53, where she magnified the Lord who "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." According to Simeon, the salvation of Jesus would bring the light of revelation for the previously-excluded Gentiles and shine the light of glory for the people of Israel.

Most often we think of babies as having very little influence—except on their parents and siblings, and maybe on their grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Possibly, a baby's influence grows as she or he goes out into the world for childcare, and then preschool and kindergarten, and then into the community and society. Eventually, the influence of a child can be quite great. But that greatness is only in proportion to how much the family, school, church, and society around that child pay attention.

The character of Simeon causes me to wonder, Are we actively looking to our children for God's salvation? Of course Jesus was unique, and not every child will bring salvation in the same way Jesus did. But what might we learn, what light might we see, if we looked to our children for guidance? What salvation might happen in our society, if we who are powerful adults took our cues and priorities from the needs of children who are weak and lowly? What would happen if we dedicated ourselves to following a child who brought salvation?

2—ANNA

In Luke 2:36-38, we also learn of the prophet Anna, who was 84 years old. Anna spent all her time at the temple, worshipping "there with fasting and prayer, night and day." She too saw baby Jesus

“and began to praise God.” She spoke “about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” *Redemption* is another word for *salvation*. Anna’s understanding was that Jerusalem needed an overhaul. Something needed to change in the way the religious and political leaders governed. Anna praised God and told others about baby Jesus because she hoped and believed that this child Jesus could help bring about those necessary changes. He was a child who brought salvation.

Again, we’re called upon by this story to ask ourselves some questions. Do we, like Anna, believe that Jesus’ way of redemption would bring salvation? Redemption in Christ isn’t just believing that he died on the cross for our forgiveness. Redemption in Christ is also following his leadership and doing what he did. So we have to ask ourselves, Are we following the lead of Jesus? Are we healing the sick? Are we providing for the hungry? Are we caring for the homeless? Are we voting for leaders and policy changes that will raise up the poor? Do we let the little children and their needs come to our attention? Do we put the plight of the little people first, like Jesus did? When we follow the lead of Jesus in those ways, that’s when we can say that there was a child who brought salvation.

3—MARY & JOSEPH

Besides Simeon and Anna, there were two other adults in this story. Jesus’ parents, Mary and Joseph, are the ones who brought him to the temple. Verses 22-24 tell us that they came because it was time “for their purification according to the law of Moses.” The Jewish law indicated that “every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord.” As part of this ritual presentation, Mary and Joseph offered the small sacrifice of two birds, which was allowed by Jewish law for those who were poor. So, from this action, we learn that Jesus’ parents weren’t very well off financially. But they were pious. They wanted to do what was right and holy. They wanted their child to start off life in the good graces of God and their faith community.

This is similar, in our Christian tradition, to parents bringing their little child for baptism. It’s a form of blessing which establishes belonging. It’s an opportunity for parents to affirm their own faith and to proclaim their desire to raise their child in the ways of God. By bringing their child for baptism,

parents also give opportunity for the faith community to respond and participate, much like Simeon and Anna did in their day. It's been a while since we had the baptism of a child at our church, but maybe you recall this congregational promise:

With God's help
we will so order our lives after the example of Christ,
that *this child*, surrounded by steadfast love,
may be established in the faith,
and confirmed and strengthened
in the way that leads to life eternal.*

When parents do their part to bring their child to faith and the faith community, then we all have an opportunity to follow the lead of a child who brought salvation.

Of course, during this pandemic time when we can't yet worship at church, it might do us well to notice Luke 2:39-40. Not all faith formation would happen at the temple. Mary and Joseph took baby Jesus home to Nazareth, where he "became strong, [was] filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon him." The parental role in faith development at home was essential. Without a doubt, Jesus' parents taught him the stories of the Hebrew scriptures. They likely followed the guidance of Deuteronomy 6:6-8, which instructed all Jewish parents to "keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." Jesus' parents would also have raised him with relatives and friends who also practiced their faith and attended the synagogue. Mary and Joseph were new parents. Jesus was their firstborn. That meant they had new responsibilities. It was time for them to follow the lead of a child who brought salvation to their family and the world.

CONCLUSION

Many of us at First United Methodist Church are long past parenthood. We're more like Simeon and Anna, in the stages of grandparent and great-grandparent-hood. At our ages, there's less we can do

to influence the next generations. But we can still live our faith values and be a witness to the goodness and potential that God brings into the world with each new child. If we care about children and their well-being, and put the needs of children first, then that will be like us wearing our faith on our foreheads and writing God's words on our doorposts. Maybe then, we can still communicate the good news about Jesus. Maybe then we can follow the lead of "a child who brought salvation."

44. **The United Methodist Hymnal*, (The United Methodist Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), p.