

**Engage Bible Study: Luke 2:21-52**  
**October 3-5, 2011**

When we last left the story Mary was pondering in her heart everything she had experienced in the previous nine months. And can we blame her? She's been given every indication that her newborn child is someone very important, but there he lies in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Hardly an auspicious start for someone who is supposedly born for greatness. No wonder Mary is a bit perplexed! And in Luke's gospel Mary is speaking for all of us. We're all supposed to be a bit befuddled at this point in the gospel. Things just aren't working out the way they're supposed to. Everything seems turned upside down. What are we to make of it all? And that's what Luke is going to address with the rest of this gospel. Who is this child, and what is God up to? Those are the questions Mary is asking. Those are the questions we're asking. And Luke is intent upon answer them.

**A. Obedience in the details: 2:21**

Our reading today begins with a small but important act of obedience. Let's read Luke 2:21 [READ]. What's up with this circumcision thing? It harkens back to Genesis 17 where God is laying out the covenant between God and Abram. God promises Abram many offspring and promises that kings will come from those offspring. As God lays out the covenant God also lays out what God requires:

*God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." – Genesis 17:9-14*

Circumcision was not something new. It was a well-known practice in the ancient world, but God took this social custom and gave it religious significance. Because circumcision was practiced by other cultures clearly it is not circumcision that makes an Israelite an Israelite. Instead circumcision is called a sign or a mark...a reminder, most likely to the recipient...that he belongs to God by covenant. Why is there no corresponding sign for women? We're not told. It could be an expression of an intensely patriarchal society. It is possible that the OT idea that through marriage...which was the cultural expectation for all people...a man and woman become one flesh, making the male's circumcision sufficient, but that's merely conjecture.

What we do know is that those males who are not circumcised are to be “cut off”...but what does that mean? The phrase is used frequently in connection to a failure to uphold the Law recorded in Leviticus. In some places the phrase seems to mean to excommunicate someone from the community...to cast them out. But in other places it means to execute them. Either way, the penalty is severe.

So, when Luke records the circumcision of Jesus he’s connecting Jesus with God’s ancient promises, but even more Luke is telling us that Mary and Joseph were obedient – and not just to the command to circumcise their son but also by naming him what the angel, Gabriel, had told them: Jesus, which means “he saves”.

### ***B. Temple Presentation: 2:22-40***

The scene now changes and we move into the temple in Jerusalem. Let’s read 2:22-40 [READ]. In this scene Luke combines two rituals. The first is the redemption of the firstborn. The ceremony included “buying back” or redeeming a child through an offering. Back when God saved the Israelites from slavery in Egypt all the firstborn sons were protected from the angel of death through the blood of a lamb. Since that time God claimed all firstborn sons, and parents had to “buy back” their child or redeem them, usually at the cost of five shekels.

The second rite is the purification of a mother after the birth of a child. For forty days after the birth of a son and eighty days after the birth of a daughter, the mother was ceremonially unclean and could not enter the temple. After this time of separation a sin offering was to be given. The offering was to be a lamb, unless the couple was very poor in which case a pair of doves or two young pigeons would suffice. Luke lets us know just how poor Mary and Joseph were by telling us that they could only afford the birds.

One of the primary reasons that Luke includes this scene is to show that Jesus was raised in a family that was very intent upon obedience to the religious law. In fact, no less than five times Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph did everything required by the law. And why would that be important? Because Jesus, in his adult years, will experience all sorts of conflict with the religious leaders around obedience to the law. Does he challenge these religious leaders because he was raised in a home that didn’t honor the faith? Absolutely not! Jesus came from a family that took great pains to be obedient.

While they were in the temple Mary and Joseph encounter a man named Simeon. We’re told that Simeon is both righteous and devout, filled with the Holy Spirit and looking forward to what Luke calls “the consolation of Israel”. .. a Jewish way of saying “the messianic age”, the time that fulfillment of God’s plan when the messiah comes. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and praises God with some profound words. Simeon says that in this child Jesus has come God’s salvation.

What does that mean? What is God's salvation? Lots of Christians today assume that God's salvation refers to getting into heaven, but rarely does salvation have to do with the afterlife. For the Jews salvation referred to liberation in the present...liberation from economic, political, religious bondage. Salvation, then, refers to the new Kingdom that Jesus has come to inaugurate...a Kingdom in which justice and peace will reign here and now, on earth as it is in heaven. That's good news!

And Simeon lets us know that this salvation is for all people. Jesus is the light that will reveal the salvation of God to the Gentiles. And notice that Jesus is "glory" for the people of Israel. If you remember last week we defined glory as the visible manifestation of the presence of God. That certainly describes Jesus. There is no fuller revelation of God than Jesus! So Simeon's words, much like the songs of Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah back in chapter one, reveal what God is up to in Jesus.

These words must have blown Mary and Joseph away! Can you imagine? But Simeon wasn't done. This salvation of God, this child, would also bring difficult times. Jesus will divide the nation as some believe the good news and others reject it. And not only that but Simeon says that Mary's soul will be pierced, the first foreshadowing on Jesus' crucifixion. Whenever I read those words I think of this scene from *The Passion of the Christ* as Jesus. WARNING...this is graphic.

And as if Simeon's words were not enough for one day Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph encounter a woman named Anna. While the details are a little confusing in the Greek it is clear that Anna is old, that she's been a widow for most of her life and that she has dedicated herself to worship in the temple. This is a righteous and devout woman. Like Simeon, Anna praises God for this child, bearing witness to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel. What does THAT mean? Redemption in the ancient world was tied to being bought out of slavery...in this case not slavery to sin but physical slavery. While the later Church certainly did connect Jesus with our redemption from sin and death, in its original context this probably referred to Israel's redemption from their slavery to Rome, from political and economic slavery.

Now, why does Luke include these two stories? What is he trying to say? In addition to the portraying Mary and Joseph as righteous, obedient Jews Luke is also using Simeon and Anna to add to the early testimony about Jesus. Remember, up to this point it's been shepherds to bear witness to who Jesus is. Here we have to upstanding, devout and righteous people who bear witness to who Jesus is. In addition, according to Jewish law a single individual's witness didn't carry much weight, but the witness of two or three did. Here we have two reliable witnesses to Jesus as the savior.

Having done everything required by the law Mary and Joseph return with Jesus to their home in Nazareth. We're told that Jesus grew up strong, healthy, wise and with God's favor.

### **C. Typical Pre-Teen? 2:41-52**

With that we're going to turn to the only story in the bible that tells us anything about Jesus' boyhood. Other than this one story we know nothing about Jesus' life between the first few weeks of his life and the beginning of his public ministry when he was about 30 years old. So, let's read about the kind of boy Jesus was [READ 2:41-52].

The Law of Moses required three pilgrimages to the temple in Jerusalem each year: Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. If you lived a long distance from Jerusalem then only Passover was mandated. Again, Luke is showing us the devout nature of Jesus' upbringing. This pilgrimage would have been a high point in the family's year, something they looked forward to. They would have traveled with both family members and neighbors to make the journey because there was safety in numbers on the dangerous roads where both bandits and wild animals threatened. This explains how Mary and Joseph could have not missed Jesus for a whole day. They would have naturally assumed that the boy was playing with friends in the large band of people.

None of the other gospel writers include this story in their account. It's possible that they hadn't heard this story, but it does raise the question, "What is Luke trying to communicate?" And the answer, I think, is several things.

First, Luke has an interest in showing continuity between what God did in the past with what God is doing in Jesus. Unlike Matthew Luke doesn't seem quite so interested in proving anything by showing the Jesus fulfills Old Testament prophecy, but Luke does want to show continuity. That continuity becomes clear when you note the striking parallels between this story and the call of Samuel in 1 Samuel 2. Hannah dedicates her son, Samuel, to God and in time the boy is taken to the temple to live. And while Samuel is living in the temple he comes to understand the calling of God upon his life. Luke sees a pattern between these two stories, because it is in the temple that Jesus, too, seems to grasp the basics of his calling. The connection between these two stories is clearly seen when we read 1 Samuel 2:26, "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people." Does that sound familiar?

Second, Luke is showing Jesus' coming of age as well as his coming to grips with his calling. At age 12 or 13 Jewish boys celebrate their bar mitzvah, a coming-of-age ceremony. And as Jesus comes to age he also comes to articulate his growing understanding of his calling, his vocation. Notice he says, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" With this line, which is the punch line of the story, Luke is revealing the special relationship that Jesus is claiming with God. In no way does this line imply that Jesus completely understood his calling and what was to come, but the tension that this scene creates with Mary is again a foreshadowing of the pain that Jesus' life and death will cause her. Having been a parent I have serious questions about how Mary responds. I think the language was "prettied up" for our benefit! So, from the

early chapters of Luke we have a taste of both the trouble and pain ahead as well as the hope that this story will proclaim.

If you look carefully at the words to some of our Christmas carols you will find, among the warm images of the Savior's birth, the stark reality of His life and death. In the carol, "What Child is This?" we sing, *"Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you."* In the lesser known carol "A Stable Lamp is Lighted" we sing, *"Yet he shall be forsaken, and yielded up to die. The sky shall groan and darken, and ev'ry stone shall cry. And ev'ry stone shall cry for stony hearts of men; God's blood upon the spear-head, God's love refused again."* If you scratch gently on the glossy surface of Christmas you will quickly find the challenging realities of life. But you will also find real hope for each and every day.

The same can be found in artwork. Holman Hunt's "The Shadow of Death" hangs in the Guggenheim. Mary kneels at the treasures brought by the Wise Men...as if wondering what happened to the promises of long ago, and Jesus' shadow foretells the crucifixion.

Life is like that for us too, isn't it? We know there will be challenging times. Maybe you're going through them now. But we also know the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. We, too, bear the marks of both death and life through our baptism. In baptism we were marked with the sign of the cross. On Ash Wednesday we are reminded of that cross, a symbol of both death and resurrection for us. So don't let trouble surprise you, but don't let it rob you of joy either. Nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Beginning in chapter three we move right into Jesus' adult life and his public ministry. In these first two chapters Luke has laid the foundation for what's to come. At every turn Luke has turned things upside down. Nothing has gone as expected. The original readers have surprised over and over again. The reader of Luke's gospel join Mary and Joseph at the end of this chapter, wondering exactly who is child is? What can we expect of him as he grows?

One of the dangers for us is that we think we know the story so well that we won't let ourselves be surprised by Jesus in the chapters ahead. Let me encourage you not only to abandon your preconceived notions as we move forward in this story, but to also open yourself up to was in which Jesus might surprise you in daily life. One of the testimonies of Luke is his gospel is that we worship a God who surprises us over and over again. So, I dare you to let God surprise you this week!