

Then Came Wilbur and Kacie

Shepherd's Grace Church

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²²When 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 firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), ²⁴and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, ²⁹"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." ³³And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too." ³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. ³⁹When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. (Luke 2: 22-40)

(Additional Context: Today we are baptizing Wyatt Charles Gosselin, son of Wilbur Gosselin and Kacie Reed. This ceremony is part of the service and part of the sermon as it ties in with the dedication of Jesus at the temple and reminds us of our responsibilities as a congregation to those who dedicate their lives to the Lord!)

Have you noticed how children change our lives? Most of us go along without a worry or care in the world. We know we have obligations and responsibilities but we feel confident that we can handle them. Even if we make mistakes as single adults we do not worry too much. We assume we can correct our mistakes, accept the consequences and move on. When we become parents, however, everything changes. Mistakes are no longer acceptable. We recognize that the consequences of our mistakes

affect not only us but these little creatures who have now invaded our world. We accept responsibility for the children but as a result, can no longer accept the consequences of our mistakes. As a result, we tend to make decisions with more caution. We pay more attention to details. We do our very best because we recognize that we now, no longer live for ourselves **BUT FOR OUR CHILDREN!** Children tend to change everything!

Joseph and Mary noticed that same thing in the gospel message of Luke that I shared with you this morning. They were in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus. In verses 20 and 21, they obeyed the law of Moses. They had their son circumcised! They assigned him a name. These were the requirements of their faith and they knew them. They had been brought up with them and they recognized that their relationship with their God would be altered if they failed to keep them. They were not willing to accept the consequences of actions especially when those consequences might have a far reaching effect on the life of their newborn son. They remained in Bethlehem therefore, that their child could be circumcised in the same place as his ancestor. This act was not one of responsibility but of tradition!

Tradition can be a great help with the acceptance of responsibility. Tradition reminds us that we are not alone in the world! It serves to assist us in recognizing that we stand with others who have passed the same way we do! It aids in realizing that while we do some things because they make sense to us, we do others because we have “always done them that way.” Responsibility is recognized as the acceptance of that which is “right” for us to do even if we do not understand it. Tradition allows us to do that which we must do because others have done it. Responsibility and tradition are tenants of our faith! They invite us to do that which is right and accept doing it out of loyalty and respect for those who have gone before.

Mary and Joseph now go up to the temple for purification according to the Law of Moses. They may not understand the reasons for their actions according to Leviticus 12: 1-8. They do not live in the same world as their ancestors knew of health and practical reasons for keeping these commands. The reasons that existed for the Law when it was given may not exist in their day but they keep the law because of tradition. They have respect for God and for their families and for the countless other people of faith who have demonstrated the same respect. They keep the law even if only as a tradition but they keep it!

They dedicate their child however, out of an understood sense of obligation. That which has been given to them belongs not to them but to God! The Law of the Lord commands them to remember all that is Holy! God establishes this Law because He, Himself is Holy and is worthy of such actions. The command to dedicate the first part of all we have is not done as a tradition, it is done as an affirmation! Mary and Joseph are saying, “we recognize God as the giver of life, and to God do we give thanks even as we offer all that has been given to us!”

No doubt, the memories of recent events would have made this gift all the more clear to them. Mary would have shared the moment of conception with Joseph. Without this honesty, Joseph would not have been able to attend to her as his betrothed. He would have believed that she was unfaithful. Both of them would have known therefore that Jesus was a gift from God, that He belonged to God and that He was to be dedicated to God! There would have been no doubt in their dedication! There would have been no recourse but for them to accept this responsibility.

Now come Wilbur and Kacie, who choose to have their child baptized. They may not understand the fullness of their actions. They may not understand that the child they hand to me in a few minutes will truly die! If they believed the child would die in a worldly sense, they would never give up the baby! None of us would...right! But let me affirm to you in this moment that the baby they give to me will die! The baby will lay down his life, the life he was born into. He will be forever changed, not because of my actions or the actions of any other person in the congregation today but because of the life-affirming action of the One True God! Wilbur and Kacie come today as part of a tradition...one started by John the Baptist, continued by Jesus Himself and handed down from generation to generation, not as a means of salvation...there is only one means of salvation... but as a means of grace. Baptism affirms for us that God alone is the giver of life, that God alone can invite us to die to our old self and live anew in Jesus! Baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual union between us and God! It is a sacrament, one of only two given to us by Jesus as a way of understanding not who we are but whose we are!

Baptism is not a law. Our salvation does not depend upon it. Baptism is a tradition that becomes for us a statement of faith. Baptism invites us to understand that we stand before God today, not alone but on the shoulders of giants, on the shoulders of our fathers and mothers and their fathers and mothers committing our lives once again to God to whom our lives along with all of our resources already belong! *Now come Wilbur and Kacie* to remind us that we have a responsibility as brothers and sisters in Christ to teach the traditions of faith so that those who come after us can remember and even understand.

While Mary and Joseph remember their traditions as handed down to them, we in some cases have forgotten to share the meaning behind the traditions we have as Christians. We teach the songs, the prayers, the holidays but we do not spend time with our children explaining the meaning! We get caught up in the tune, the rhyme, the regalia of the tradition and we forget the meaning that lies underneath.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we were gathered here in our sanctuary watching as our young children portrayed for us the Christmas play. It was a play we have watched young children bring to life for generations. We laughed at their antics. We were overjoyed by their costumes. We were amazed at the effort put into their effort by the teachers but when we left this place with them, did we discuss with

them the truth behind what they had shared? Did we slowly and carefully walk them through the miracle that Mary and Joseph experienced? Did we explain to them that their production was a re-enactment of a time when the world stood still, when heaven and earth were caught up as one if even only for a single moment, that in that moment God, the creator of all things, became human and lived with us in order that He might share with us God's desire for us to love him, to cherish Him, to glorify Him and to live with Him forever? It is wonderful that we teach the traditions but if we fail to teach the truth behind the tradition, eventually the tradition will die out.

“’twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. The stockings were hung by the chimney with care in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there. The children were nestled, all snug in their beds while visions of sugar plums danced in their heads. Ma in her kerchief and I in my cap had just settled down for a long winter's nap when out on the lawn I heard such a clatter, I sprang from my bed to see what was the matter. Away to the window I flew like a flash, tore open the shutters and threw back the sash. The moon on the crest of the new fallen snow gave luster of midday to objects below! “

I have not seen the words to this poem in print for about fifty years but I so carefully memorized the poem that I can still remember this much without even consulting a manuscript. Many of you can do the same thing. I know because as I recited it this morning I watched you mouthing the words from memory right along with me! Why? Because you learned the poem as part of a tradition! You learned in an environment that was important to you. Perhaps it was in a school classroom where you were required but then you got caught up and actually wanted to learn! Teachers count on that kind of tradition you know...brothers or sisters who came before you and were required to memorize or act out or sing something and now younger brothers and sisters come along and want the same part as their brother or sister!

Perhaps as was my case, you learned from your parents. *Twas the Night Before Christmas* was a poem we memorized when I was about nine as we were driving down to Oklahoma City to see my grandparents for Christmas. Mom had a copy and we spent the entire trip committing the words to memory! Mostly, I suppose we started learning to make the time pass more quickly...because my mom anticipated those words parents dread, “are we there yet?” But when we got to my grandparent's house, they were so pleased and responded with such great love that we wanted to do more. As a result, every year until my granddad died, we remembered, re-memorized and recited the poem. It was a tradition born not out of necessity but out of ease!

Church traditions are different, however. Church traditions serve not to perpetuate the ritual of worship but to help us learn the truth of worship for ourselves. We teach the songs, re-enact the plays, respond to the special services so we can continue to share the significance of a particular reality. That reality is that God, our creator loves us so much that God wants a deep and special relationship with us.

To affect that relationship, God planned even before the beginning of time and creation to send for us a redeemer, a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord. This is our profession of faith. It cannot be proven but it is real and it cannot be denied. Others may scoff but they cannot disprove or deny the relationship we have with a Living God!

Traditions like the ones observed by Mary and Joseph this morning serve to honor that relationship. They are passed down and they are taught so the relationship can be deepened and not so it will become trivialized. Mary and Joseph took their responsibility to the tradition of purification and sacrifice seriously, not because it “was always done this way,” but because they had learned the fullness of the meaning of the tradition from those who had gone before them.

Today, in the 21st century, we tend to forget the teaching and implement the tradition so we can have fun, entertain one another and regale each other with memories of “Christmas Past.” Nowhere is it more clear that this is the case than in the singing of some of our songs. This morning, I am using only one example but there are many. This morning I invite you to think of the song, *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. Is there any person here who can name all the 12 days in the song? (I asked and Maggie Krout volunteered to name them all. She was successful.) Perhaps you will remember them as well!

On the first day of Christmas my true love gave to me

A partridge in a pear tree

Two turtle doves

Three French hens

Four calling birds

Five Golden rings

Six geese a laying

Seven swans a swimming

Eight maids a milking

Nine ladies dancing

Ten lords a leaping

11 pipers pipping

12 drummers drumming

The song is sung as we all know as a progressive piece. Each verse repeats a new part as well as recalling all the old parts so that on each verse of the song we are reminded of all our "True Love gives to us! It is a fun song because as the numbers get larger, the difficulty increases and many will stumble and laugh but most will start again until they get it right. It is a wonderful technique for teaching the words and the aid of a catchy tune helps make the work easier.

What most of us do not know however is the rest of the teaching behind the song. It is not, as many think, a secular song made up to emphasize the generosity of a courting lover at Christmas time. It is instead, a catechism, a teaching that has served for generations to teach the fullness of the Christmas season. The first gift, the partridge is Jesus. The second is the two testaments of God's Holy Word. The third is the trinity. The fourth is the four gospels. The fifth is the first five books of the Old Testament known as *Torah*. The sixth is for the 6 days of creation. The seventh is the Sabbath. The eighth is the 8 beatitudes. The ninth is the nine choirs of angels who joined in announcing the birth of Christ. The tenth is the ten commandments. The eleventh is the eleven faithful disciples and the 12th is for the 12 precepts in the Apostle's Creed. Each day is a principle of faith that was originally taught to help children remember the importance of the elements of their faith.

Over the years, however, these elements of faith have fallen away from the song until today, they are no longer remembered. The tradition of the music has become lost and the song has become a secular round with no real sense of meaning. In fact, there are news stories out each year that estimate the current cost of the gifts given during the 12 days. I believe the number I heard this year was well over a million dollars. What a shame that a song dedicated to teaching about gifts of which there was no price has been reduced to dollars and cents.

The material world has once again appropriated something priceless and attempted to put a price tag on it. The material world which cannot see nor understand has reduced that which is precious to that which is to be worked for, earned by means of our own labor. Lost in the tradition is the recognition that there is no price great enough for our salvation. There is no wage that can be applied to the deepened relationship God desires with us! There is not work that can be performed to put God's grace in material terms.

Even more sad than that...even more the loss than that is that the words concentrated on in the song are not the most important words to be considered. We spend so much time remembering the gifts of the 12 days that we forget the giver. We are so caught up in the focus on material things that we forget

the gifts are only signs, only tokens of affection from the giver. We forget that in each and every verse the giver is remembered first.

“On the first day of Christmas **MY TRUE LOVE** gave to me. On the second day and the third and on every succeeding day from now till the end of eternity the gifts are given by my true love, by the one who desired the relationship so much that that one did not withhold even the most precious gift of all, the Son!

The most important lesson in the song is that these gifts are given, these gifts that are estimated at over a million dollars by the world today are given by our True Love, our God who gives them all without cost, without price as gifts of grace poured out on us because God loves us! (Isaiah 55 and 43) Those who are caught up in the world cannot receive these gifts because they can only perceive them in the presence of a price tag. Those of us who will hear this lesson today can receive them because we can recognize in them that once, in a place far from here, on a night dark and lonely God sent light, the light of the world and on that night, the world stood still and the heavens stopped to watch as God fulfilled a covenant made from before the beginning of time. The word became flesh and walked among us as evidence of God’s grace, God’s precious gift and there was love! (John 1: 1-18)

Now Come Wilbur and Kacie, and they bring with them little Wyatt Charles. They seek even more than they know. Today, they seek to remind us of our traditions. They seek to help us recover the traditions of our faith that have been lost and have fallen away. They seek to remind us of Simeon who believed in God’s promise and of Anna who spoke of God’s faithfulness. They bring their son, their only son to die to a self he has not even become yet so that he can live to a self that is not his own but rather belongs to God. They seek to dedicate him, to present him to God and to declare with all of us an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual seal. They seek to establish once and for all time a relationship with God that will be unbroken.

They come seeking our commitment with them that we will faithfully teach Wyatt our traditions and the full meaning of them. They seek our commitment that we will live according to our faith, demonstrating unfailing love and recognizing God’s promise of eternal life for all people. They seek a renewal of our faith, a faith in some cases forgotten but never forsaken!

They come in peace, in Shalom, where nothing is missing and nothing is broken. They come in hope...not idle wish but joy filled expectation. They come in love, united as one family and seeking union with all of us. They come in joy, recognizing God’s grace even from before the beginning of time. They come to Christ. They come to see the light grow, the light of Christmas that they want to share with Wyatt and all the world all year long. *Now Come Wilbur and Kacie! Amen!*