

Name of Jesus
Peace, Seattle
January 1, 2017 epk
Luke 2:21-40

PRECARIOUS: FULL OF PRAYERS

The New Year is once again upon us, accompanied, as usual, by a diverse collection of hopes and longings for how the next twelve months will unfold.

In the post-election geo-political realm, prognosticators suggest wildly varied scenarios for what's ahead in 2017, from sublime to ridiculous; wonderful to dreadful.

While on a personal level, we tell ourselves the slate is clean. And we resolve to rid ourselves of old habits by embracing new ones. There are pounds to be lost, goals to achieve, books to read, relationships to kindle, places to go.

It's the thing to do, this New Year ritual...and it's not a bad idea, really, resolving to be a better person, to take a few more steps toward that image we carry inside of who we want to be.

When it comes of the life of faith, this Day falls in the middle of a Christmas season in which we look into the face of Mary's boy child and come to recognize him as the long awaited fulfillment of God's promises. So as we cross the divide that separates one year from the next, we carry with us the conviction that greater purposes are at work, both within our lives and within the world.

Instead of orienting our lives around the predictions of pundits, we orient our lives around God's promise to be in our midst, working beneath the world's radar to accomplish God's intentions.

This conviction is mirrored in our gospel text this morning in the faithful journey of Mary and Joseph, in the naming of their son, in the song of Simeon, and in the exclamation of Anna.

Poet Michael Meade has said:

IT'S OUR KNOWLEDGE OF DEATH THAT MAKES US PRAY. EVERY PATH A CHILD TAKES LOOKS PRECARIOUS TO THE PARENT'S EYE. AND IT IS, AND "PRECARIOUS" IS AN OLD WORD WHICH MEANS "FULL OF PRAYERS."

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph—still learning the ropes of parenthood, still living off the adrenaline that helps new moms and dads survive the sleep deprivation of those early weeks—are intent on fulfilling the customs passed down through the generations of their people.

So being the good parents they are, full of prayers, they bring their baby to receive the sign in his flesh that would mark him as a son of Abraham, and they give him his name: **JESUS** – in Hebrew—**Yeshua**: **he delivers, he rescues, he saves; the name given to them by God's messenger before he was conceived.**

When later they come back to the Temple to honor Mary's entry back into the public sphere after childbirth, they have no expectation they would be anything but anonymous. But something unexpected happens. After they offer the poor person's sacrifice to complete the required ritual, an old man approaches them with arms outstretched, beckoning to hold the child... And in that split second when parents intuit whether a stranger can be trusted or not, they assent, and Mary carefully places their bundled boy into the elder's arms while Joseph hovers near at hand.

The man, his name is Simeon, gazes into the face of the infant and he begins to sing:
Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, your word has been fulfilled.
For my own eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared in the sight of every people.
A light to reveal you to the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.

Amazed at what's being said about their child, Joseph and Mary stand there speechless.
Simeon confirms what Mary learned at Gabriel's visitation, and what the shepherds said at his birth.

But he doesn't stop there. He keeps speaking, now in more mysterious terms, about the journey that awaits the child.

THIS CHILD, he says, IS DESTINED FOR THE FALLING AND THE RISING OF MANY IN ISRAEL, AND TO BE A SIGN THAT WILL BE OPPOSED SO THAT THE INNER THOUGHTS OF MANY WILL BE REVEALED.

Yeshua, he claims, will serve like some sort of MRI scanning instrument, peering into the very heart and marrow of people's souls.

A SWORD WILL PIERCE YOUR OWN SOUL TOO, he tells Mary, and with those words, a dark shadow flees across the scene.

Even this early in Luke's story of Jesus, with the baby still in diapers, there are hints that the path ahead of him and for his parents, will have more than its share of trials.

It's not there in the text, but can't you feel their inner resolve growing? I do!

- Their resolve to protect and prepare him, as best they are able...
- To prepare themselves to meet whatever circumstances might lay ahead?

There's something here in Simeon's word to Mary with which every parent can identify.

- LATE NIGHT TRIPS TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM.
- SURGERIES THAT LEAVE LASTING SCARS.
- PHONE CALLS TELLING OF MISHAPS OR ACCIDENTS or WOUNDINGS of another kind.

Every parent knows that parenthood means A SWORD WILL PIERCE YOUR OWN SOUL, TOO.

In this gospel story Simeon reveals something to Mary and Joseph about their child that will be a source both of joy and of pain to them. And Anna, the prophetess, adds her voice as confirmation.

It is a prefiguring of the hopes and expectations that await him; of what his life will be like, his destiny. And what our lives, too, will hold if we count ourselves among his followers.

- **Because Jesus is God's representative, he will draw opposition.**
 - Because we seek to live as Jesus calls us to live, we will draw opposition.
- **Because Jesus is light, the forces of darkness will oppose him.**
 - Because we seek to walk in his light, the evil powers of the world will seek to insert themselves between us and our Lord.

This New Year begins with the conviction that, wherever the journey may lead us, our fortunes and futures are yoked to his.

EVERY PATH A CHILD TAKES LOOKS PRECARIOUS TO THE PARENT'S EYE. AND IT IS. AND "PRECARIOUS" IS AN OLD WORD WHICH MEANS "FULL OF PRAYERS."

“If the future were not the promise of Jesus Christ but the predictable outcome of present trends,” writes James Kay, “despair would overwhelm us... If trends predict anything, it is that death and dissolution bring an end to every human heart and hope.”

But the message of the gospel “...is that we can never take our own projections more seriously than God’s promises. When we least expect it and when there is no evidence for it, God’s power comes into this godless world in ways the world itself could never predict or foresee.”¹

As we begin 2017, then, perhaps one more resolution is in order. A resolution to trust that however the New Year unfolds, the God whose face we behold in the Babe of Bethlehem will be there, turning all things toward newness in ways both tender and fierce, so that all might experience the saving grace and sense of belonging that come with being children of God.

Prayer:

Abba/Imma, Father/Mother, you have claimed us as your own dear children and we are as precious in your sight as the baby in Mary’s arms. In this New Year, when our lives become marked by failures small and great, and our souls are pierced by losses beyond our ability to fathom, turn our sorrow into joy as we put our trust in the Word become flesh, who is our Crucified and Risen Lord. Amen.

¹ James F. Kay, writing in *The Christian Century*, 1997.