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Epiphany 4A Presentation of our Lord
Peace, Seattle
February 2, 2014
Luke 2:22-40

DESTINY

Not a few of us have the BIG GAME on our minds this morning. And how could we not? The 12th man is alive and well in Seattle, and for the last two weeks it's been nonstop SEAHAWK fever wherever you go in this city.

The thought of a first-in-the-history-of-the-franchise Seattle Superbowl victory is so tantalizing we can taste it. And the set up of these two opposing teams feels like destiny:

- The #1 offense of Peyton Manning and the Broncos versus the #1 defense in all of football: the Legion of Boom.

The story lines are many and we've heard them *ad nauseam*; from Russell Wilson meeting Manning at quarterback camp when he was in high school, to the unscripted antics of Richard Sherman, to the off-field reticence of Marshawn Lynch to engage the media.

We've even got our own friendly competition going on with Colorado Lutherans, a food vs. food, donation vs. donation battle that'll serve people in our communities after the final whistle is blown.

When the kids and I were at the store picking up canned goods for that effort, there was a guy engaging other 12th men he met on every aisle, with the mantra:
"THIS IS OUR TIME, THIS OUR YEAR."

Well, is it destiny? The dictionary defines DESTINY as: "The apparently predetermined and inevitable series of events that happen to somebody or something." [1]

Will Manning and company find a way to victory, returning the Broncos to their glory days under legend John Elway and securing Manning's stature as one of the great quarterbacks of all time?

Or will Pete Carroll's upstart Seahawks, led by a sophomore quarterback and a cadre of late round draft picks who dared believe in themselves when others didn't, seize the day and claim the Lombardi Trophy?

Only time will tell. And that time, thank goodness, will finally arrive at 3:30 this afternoon.

By now you're wondering, I'm sure, what the connection is between the Superbowl and our scripture readings this morning. Well the answer is NOTHING. Or at least mostly nothing; for there is—however fine and thin it may be—one thread of connection. And that thread has to do with destiny.

In addition to being Superbowl Sunday, today is also The Presentation of our Lord, a day on which the church recalls Jesus' first visit to the Temple, 40 days after his birth.

Luke, who more than any other gospel writer highlights the continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the new revelation in Jesus, tells us how Joseph and Mary bring their newborn son to God in accordance with the law of Moses.
Everything goes according to script at first:

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- They offer the poor man's version of the standard sacrifice so that Mary, after childbirth, is ritually "clean" once more, and having fulfilled their duty they're ready to move on.

But it's at that point that two unscripted encounters take place.

There in the Temple an old man approaches them with arms outstretched, beckoning to hold the child. Luke gives us the inside scoop on the man, whose name is Simeon, but Joseph and Mary know nothing of that.

As they face him they exchange looks with each other—as if to say, is this man, safe?—and decide quickly, YES; and so with lots of care and a little caution, Mary places her child in the arms of this elder while Joseph hovers near, ready.

Holding him close, Simeon gazes into that little face and realizes that his life is now complete. He has seen with his own eyes God's promised salvation coming into the world, a light that will make God known to the world in a way that ,before now, was hidden.

After this blessing, Simeon goes on to speak mysteriously to Mary about the journey that awaits them.

THIS CHILD, he says, IS DESTINED FOR THE FALLING AND THE RISING OF MANY IN ISRAEL. HE WILL BE A SIGN THAT WILL BE OPPOSED SO THAT THE INNER THOUGHTS OF MANY WILL BE REVEALED—AND A SWORD WILL PIERCE YOUR OWN SOUL TOO.

A peculiar destiny awaits this child, one which involves the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. He will provide a kind of litmus test for God's people, a diagnostic look into the heart and soul.

Simeon's words are still sinking in when another figure, Anna the prophetess, comes over to see the babe, and it's clear that she, too, recognizes the child Jesus as the one destined by God to bring about the world's redemption.

Destiny, Luke tells us, is a double-edged sword, much more complex than what we bargained for.

To be "destined for victory" sounds attractive, but with light comes shadow, and there's a lot more Jesus will have to go through before he claims that crown.

As Luke's gospel unfolds we will learn that its the outsiders, finally, who perceive who Jesus truly is, while the insiders, the guardians and leaders of the tradition—the very community God had chosen to be conduits of blessing for the world—end up rejecting him.

Destiny. There's a lot more at stake here than meets the eye.

Both joy and pain await this child's journey and—here's the point—prefigure what life holds for us, too, when we count ourselves among his followers.

Because Jesus is God's representative, he will draw opposition.
Because we seek to live as Christ calls us to live, we will draw opposition.

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Because Jesus is light, he will draw the forces of darkness.
Because we seek to walk in his light, the evil forces of the world will seek to obscure our path.

Jesus, once grown, will bring truth to light and in so doing will throw all who come in contact with him into a crisis of decision. In that decision, falling and rising, death and life, will result.

We can talk about "TEAMS OF DESTINY" today, and we will…
We can talk about the rise and fall of the GREAT FOOTBALL DYNASTIES, and we will…

But the stakes here in this second chapter reach much higher and extend much farther.

In the world it's always rise and fall, but with Jesus, as Simeon says, it's *fall first & then rise*. The rising does not take place without the falling.[2]
"UNLESS A GRAIN OF WHEAT FALLS INTO THE EARTH AND DIES,
IT REMAINS JUST A SINGLE GRAIN; BUT IT IF DIES, IT BEARS MUCH FRUIT."[3]

This is the rhythm of the Christian life.

In the final analysis, our ultimate destiny is not dependent on whether we summon whatever combination of skill and luck it takes to win the big one.

Our ultimate destiny has already been decided. Not by a field goal or tipped ball in the waning seconds of the game, but in the victory Christ Jesus won on the cross.

And we participate in that victory when we seize on it as the gift it is, and share it, and live it, and trust it, by trusting him.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, whatever the outcome of today's game you have shared with us a more enduring outcome of eternal significance: your hard-won victory over death. Through your victory in the cross and resurrection you have destined us for hope. Help us to live lives of exuberant joy knowing that nothing in all creation, no circumstance or outcome, will be able to separate us from your love and calling to shine your light. Amen.

[2] James Howell, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B:1 (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), p. 166.
[3] John 12:24