

Temples, Babies, and the Risk of Faith

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Preaching on:
Luke 2:22–40

The Temple was a place you could put your faith in. Imagine it with me: Approaching Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph and the baby, it's the Temple that you can see from miles off; it's the Temple that makes up the entirety of the great city's skyline. Passing through Jerusalem's walls, in every quarter of the city, wherever you go, the sky is dominated by the Temple's immensity. Finally arriving at its base, you see great staircases climbing and twisting up three stories before reaching the height of the lowest courtyards. Cunningly carved out of natural features that had been extensively reinforced and expanded upon over centuries, there are—here at the base—carved stones, some 26 feet in length and weighing up to 400 tons—megaliths so large that today science has lost the arts that could have moved them, let alone place and stack them with such exacting precision.

Climbing up to the heights of the walls or the towers of the Temple, 20 stories above the city streets below, you can see an expanse of open architecture that could hold every cathedral, every mosque, every sacred site you have ever visited in the modern world—all of them together—with room to spare. Spread out over the mount, across a space that could hold 27 football fields, you see dozens of buildings and courtyards, bridges and aqueducts, gateways and marketplaces—each with its sacred and civil purposes, leaving room between for up to one million worshipers. You are looking down upon the largest religious construction in all of human history at the height of its glory.

And there at the center of the mount: the Temple itself, the Holy of Holies, the place where God dwells, where the Presence of the Lord IS. In the courtyard just outside it, the blood from sacrifices runs over the hewn stones, and the viscera of lambs, and doves, and bulls sizzles on great beds of red hot coals. The greasy smoke climbs up into the sky to delight the heavenly hosts with its pleasing smells. On the journey home, miles away, if you turn your head back over your shoulder you will still be able to see the thin smudge of dark smoke ever rising, reminding you that the heart of the world is still there, beating, pumping lifeblood, touching heaven in its ineffable way, doing the work that is pleasing to God.

The Temple is a place you can put your faith in—ancient, huge, and holy, it connects heaven and earth, humanity and God, the beginning of creation and the end of all times. Its walls contain us and protect us. Its weight anchors us. Its smoke tethers us to the Holy of Holies and lifts us up to Heaven.

Babies, on the other hand, are the exact opposite sort of thing from temples. They're brand new—untested and unproven. They are small, fragile, weak, rather useless and, frankly, ill-formed. Their heads are ridiculously big, their limbs are comically short, it takes years just to get them to use the toilet, and then decades more hard work from extended family, friends, church, teachers, doctors, orthodontists, therapists, coaches, and counselors just to get them their first decent paying job and to actually start being productive members of society.

Babies? Babies are—cute. Temples... define us. Babies can't do anything, they come with no guarantees, no return policy, and are really nothing more than—than a *possibility*. And you do not know what you are going to get.

So, I'm not that surprised that in all the Temple that day, filled with tens of thousands of worshipers and visitors, in all that ancient and mighty place, there were only two old souls—Anna and Simeon—who saw the Baby Jesus and who recognized him for what he was—a messianic possibility, a change in the temple tempo, an unfixed future—and who were willing and able to celebrate this uncertain sort of salvation. Of all the pious pilgrims in the Temple that day only Anna and Simeon held the baby in their arms, sang to him, prophesied about him, and thanked God for getting to *glimpse the possibility* of the Good News, for seeing with their old, dim eyes this small and rather unlikely beginning.

What made Anna and Simeon different from the rest? Perhaps, the Holy Spirit was speaking to the whole of the Temple that day, with a spiritual shout to their souls that said, “Come and see! Come and see the anointed one, God’s Messiah, the Christ, who will reconcile the whole world to God! Who will throw open the doors of the Temple! Who will flip the tables of the money changers! WHO WILL DO THINGS DIFFERENTLY!”

And maybe a lot of people did, without consciously realizing it, obey the command and wander through the crowds until they brushed past Mary and Joseph, straining intuitively to get a glimpse of God’s salvation, and seeing—where they had hoped to discover another Temple, another Holy of Holies, another old friend, a Messiah entire who breaths fire and knows my name—just a baby, 40 days old.

“Ahhhh,” they thought to themselves in the deep chambers of their pondering hearts, “hmmmm... Not quite what I was hoping for. I think I’ll wait and see. A few miracles maybe, some good sermons like the old high priest gives, and of course a strong arm, natural leader, head of a great army, fond of me. When he marches forth with his army from the Temple mount and reaches down to pull me up on the back of his horse, looking deep into my eyes and touching my soul, then I will follow him... to our certain victory. But for now—too risky, too uncertain. Frankly, it looks like he needs me more than I need him! Ha! So, let me go and make my sacrifice and go home again and if this was meant to be, at some point, he will come and find me.”

Anna and Simeon were different. Though they had spent their whole lives in the Temple, though in some symbolic way you could say that they were the Temple, they were willing to put their faith and trust in the disruptive possibility—the mere possibility—of something new—of a baby.

And now here we are, poised on the threshold of a new year. Are we like the throngs in the Temple, holding tight to the structures we know, only finding solace in the immensity and certainty of the established, the sure thing? Or are we like Anna and Simeon, with eyes that can spy the eternal in the transient—the divine possibility in a humble beginning?

What will we put our faith in in 2024? As you look ahead into the new year, if you’re like me you’re probably dreading some things—the war in Gaza, the war in Ukraine, the presidential election. And when you’re dreading big stories like these or perhaps others or possibilities in your own life, the

tendency is to feel that only some big miracle, some grand sign or wonder, some total victory can make the world a better place. But those old souls, Anna and Simeon, tell us that there is another way to find a way through difficult times. Are we ready, like those old souls, to embrace the small, the uncertain, the mere possibilities that lie before us? Possibilities that (just like little baby messiahs) might need us right now more than we need them? Will we have the courage to offer our blessings to God's possibilities? Or will we go home and continue to wait?

God's work is often found in the unexpected: In imperfect people, in small acts of kindness, in quiet moments of prayer. God's presence is not always where we think we should be looking for it. It's not always locked away, under guard, in the Holy of Holies. Sometimes it's in the hand that reaches out in compassion, in the word spoken in love, in the heart that gives selflessly. Will I give my very best to the little opportunities to make the world a little better in 2024? Or will I go home and wait for the world to settle down and start being nice again?

As people of faith, our call this New Year is to watch for the opportunities that God is offering us to have hope and to make things a little better. It's to believe in God's possibilities, even before they've matured, even before we fully understand them. It's to have faith like Anna and Simeon—who knew deep in their hearts that the possibility in a baby was a greater reason to hope than all certainty in the world.

The possibilities for this coming year are as limitless as our willingness to hold them and bless them when they're still just possibilities.