

Feb 2, 2025

The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

With Luke as our gospel guide for this liturgical year, we are hearing more stories of Jesus as a youngster in these post-Advent seasons of Christmas and Epiphany than we sometimes, otherwise get from the other gospel authors

The first Sunday after Christmas told the story of Jesus's parents going to Jerusalem for the Passover with a large crowd and accidentally leaving him in Jerusalem – a true “I thought you had the baby!” moment – when they went back to find him, he was in the Temple like “where did you think I'd be?”

Last week was Jesus, again in the Temple, unrolling the scroll at the early stages of his ministry

And this week, we celebrate the Celebration of Our Lord – where Mary and Joseph bring Jesus, again, to the Temple for the ritual of purifying Mary after Jesus' birth (a requirement under the Law of Moses) and to recognize Jesus as the firstborn son and therefore to dedicate him to God (another requirement of the Law of Moses)

Time hops back and forth between some of these stories – Jesus is 12, Jesus is 20, Jesus is 30 days old – but the gospels, and our lectionary, aren't meant to be chronological tellings of Jesus' life

Rather, they are kerygmatic narratives — they seek to proclaim the gospel and to undergird and strengthen faith in Christ<sup>1</sup>

Kerygmatic coming from the Greek word “kerygma” meaning to preach or proclaim

In contrast to the Advent gospel stories which, through the visions and witness of Zechariah and Mary – anticipated the arrival of Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/first-sunday-of-christmas-2/commentary-on-luke-222-40-3>

These post-Advent kerygmatic narratives – through the visions and witness of Simeon and Anna (notice Luke gives equal time and reverence to the witness of women in his gospel) – anticipate what this newly arrived Jesus will do

It's interesting, and certainly not a coincidence, that as the focus shifts from Jesus' arrival to wondering what he'll do and who he'll be in his lifetime, we get these childhood narratives that all center around moments in the Temple

Luke – as with the other three gospel writers – emphasized that Jesus is one of us, Jesus is devoted to our tradition, and Jesus is devoted to God

Jesus and his family were devout followers of the tradition – as their pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Passover, his reading from the scroll, his presentation at the Temple and Mary's sacrifice for purification illustrate

Jesus' ministry is therefore meant to be a consolation to his community – as Simeon himself proclaims when he holds the baby Jesus in his arms

And it's going to be a challenge, as Simeon notes to Jesus' parents: he will be “a sign that will be opposed.”

What is it that Jesus will do that could make him both a consolation and a sign to be opposed?

How could it be that Jesus could come across as good news – the redemption of Jerusalem Anna says – and troubling news, dare we say *bad* news?

Like prophets that have come before him, Jesus will – in word and action – point out how far the people of God have deviated from God's vision for creation

He does so by radically *living* God's vision for creation

And, in doing so, he is perceived as an antagonist of the faith – a trouble maker, a blasphemer, a thorn in their side – and they will eventually align themselves with the empire, and seek to have him killed

As I preached last week: “Good news to the poor and the ‘year of the Lord’s favor’ sound great until we get into the nitty-gritty of what that means.”

It is no mistake that Luke bases so many of these childhood narratives of Jesus *in the Temple* – because rather than coming to earth to be an antagonist to God’s vision and God’s people, Jesus came as a deeply faithful fulfillment of God’s vision

Joy Moore, a preaching professor and seminary president in Illinois writes: “This background is significant to establish that Jesus does not abandon his parents teaching, but in fact fulfills all that is required of the Law...The tension Jesus has with the Law is never that of an outsider, but as one who has faithfully observed the divine expectations.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus came to be “the consolation of Israel” and “the redemption of Jerusalem” by coming alongside the people, the traditions, and the institutions that are most meant to embody God’s vision here on earth, and because he embodied the gap between those people and places and the vision of God, he came to embody “a sign that [would] be opposed”

Our faith-ancestors didn’t like it then, and to be honest, we don’t like it now

Nobody likes being told – dare we say called out – on the gap between who they are, where they position themselves, and the institutions to which they align in the world and the gospel truth of God’s immense love, radical mercy, and unfathomable grace

But, indeed, that is what Jesus came to do.

And, God bless the Rev. Stephanie Spellers, Canon for Evangelism, Reconciliation, and Creation for the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, because she endeavors to do just that, too, in her book “The Church Cracked Open” which is our current Book of 2 Months Club

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/presentation-of-our-lord/commentary-on-luke-222-40-4>

Rev. Spellens names and acknowledges what researchers and scholars have been telling us for the last 15 years regarding the context of the church and faith communities in the United States which is ultimately a narrative of decline

There is dwindling attendance, overall, in churches and other places of worship, and an increased number of people who identify, when asked, as unaffiliated – the rise of the nones as the 2012 Pew Research report called it<sup>3</sup> – n-o-n-e-s not n-u-n-s

The very same report noted that when people are asked what word they associate with “Christian” the top answer was “hypocrite” and that a growing number of people don’t see churches or religious groups positively impacting social issues in their communities or contributing to a greater sense of morality

Spellens writes her book with the added contexts of the COVID 19 pandemic and the season of racial reckoning that has risen in our American consciousness after the murder of George Floyd in the spring of 2020

In such contexts, the church has not always known what to do, how to function, or even how to survive

In the introduction to her book, Spellens writes: “Our trusty navigational devices would not work here, so we’d better learn to trust God to provide direction and sustenance, as the Israelites learned the hard way during their forty-year wilderness sojourn. Like our forebears, we would have to embrace uncertainty and loss, humbly recenter our lives with the margins, and fundamentally redefine what is holy, what is worship, and what makes a follower of Jesus.”<sup>4</sup>

As a book club, we’ve read her introduction and first four chapters which mostly speak about what she perceives to be the problem, or rather the challenges the church faces

She writes about the church’s – and she means both “Church’s” and “churches” – historical entanglements with racism, colonialism, and proximity to power that have

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

<sup>4</sup> Spellens, Stephanie. *The Church Cracked Open: Disruption, Decline, and New Hope for Beloved Community*. Church Publishing Inc., New York, 2021

seen our tradition and denominations struggle “to differentiate between what is holy and essential and what is actually racial, cultural, and class preference.” (p. 13)

It is, in many ways, a chilling interrogation of the people, traditions, and systems we have grown to love and adore

It is no wonder that Stephanie, and others like Stephanie in both sacred and secular spaces, are painted as antagonists, trouble-makers, and thorns in our side

But in reality, Stephanie – and all those who ask us to reckon with sin, align with the outcast, and turn to change direction – is, truly, the faithful fulfillment of Jesus and the movement he started 2,000 years ago

Joy Moore noted that for Jesus, in his time and his context, “practices of the law that subvert God’s command to love are unacceptable requirements, and Jesus repeatedly condemns those who attempt to flaunt their holiness before God without hospitality toward neighbor.”

Bishop Andrew Doyle of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas describes Rev. Spellers and her work in his endorsement on the back of the book by saying: “She invites her readers to stop negotiating with the past and to realize that love is not maintaining and protecting community but the very cracking open at the heart of community.”

This sermon is not just meant to be an endorsement of Rev. Spellers book – though I’d love for you to join our second conversation about it at the end of February

But it is meant to acknowledge that just as Jesus came to help his community faithfully reckon with the gap between who they are, where they position themselves, and the institutions to which they align in the world and the gospel truth of God’s immense love, radical mercy, and unfathomable grace, there are prophets today who are helping us do the same

So when our Vestry makes a commitment to DEI - diversity, equity, and inclusion – this is not us trying to be some “woke” church, rather it is our leadership committing to a faithful response to God’s vision, and our Teacher, Jesus’ example

It is a personal process and it is a communal process – one we are not expected to get totally right immediately

As Spellers notes in her book, those who faithfully coined the term “Beloved Community” – in response to the faith they had in God’s vision of love – they didn’t “expect any group to achieve this ideal, reconciled state, but they all trusted the striving would make life worth living.”

For the example of our great antagonist and fulfillment of God’s love, Jesus, I give thanks this morning

And for those who continue in the glow of the lamp Jesus lit for our path to help guide our church and our community today, I give thanks this morning.

Amen.