

Four Little Words

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Luke 2.21-40 | December 31, 2017

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I. Introduction to this Study

Last week we finished our series engaging the Four Little Words of Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. We will continue in Luke's gospel through Easter, looking at the most compelling figure in history, Jesus. This week we consider the impact Jesus had, even as a baby, on those around him.

II. Connecting with One Another

What rituals and traditions did your family observe when you were growing up? What purpose did they serve? What rituals and traditions do you observe now? Why?

III. Study the Text

a. Begin by reading Luke 2.21-24.

Jewish families underwent three ceremonies soon after a child was born.

Circumcision and naming. If the baby was a boy he was circumcised on the eighth day, marking his acceptance into the covenant community (Gen. 17.9-14).

Regardless of sex, the baby was given a name. Both rites gave the child an identity. According to Matt. 1.21 What identity does Jesus' name imply?

Redemption of the firstborn. As a reminder of the exodus, the firstborn child was consecrated to the Lord (Ex. 13.2, 11-16). The firstborn *male* was to be redeemed (bought back) at a price of five shekels of silver (Num. 18.15-16). In doing this the parents acknowledged that the child belonged to God, who alone has the power to give life.

Purification of the mother. After the birth of a male child the mother was considered ceremonially unclean for seven days and underwent purification for thirty-three days. (The period was twice as long for a female child, see Lev. 12.1-5.) During this time she was not permitted to enter the Temple or touch a holy object. After forty days (or eighty for a girl), she was to offer a sacrifice of a lamb and pigeon or turtledove. If she could not afford a lamb, the mother could offer instead two turtledoves or pigeons (Lev. 12.6-8).

Luke says that Joseph and Mary offered "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." What does this tell us about their socio-economic status?

b. Now read Luke 2.25-35. How is Simeon described in verses 25-26? What is special about him?

Note: The "consolation of Israel" refers to God's future intervention for Israel: the restoration of the people and the fulfillment of God's redemptive work.

c. This encounter with the parents of Jesus would have taken place in the Court of Women. Read what Simeon says in verses 29-32 as he is holding the baby Jesus. What do you notice, especially in verse 32?

Look up Isaiah 42.6 and 49.6. These chapters of Isaiah had come to be understood as referring to the coming Messiah. What do they describe about the "mission" of Jesus that might be surprising to the Jewish people? Who, in your opinion, are the "gentiles" today?

d. Simeon says at the end of verse 35, to Mary, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." What do you think he means? How would you have felt if you were Mary hearing this?

- e. Now read Luke 2.36-40. What impresses you about Anna, the prophetess, as Luke describes her?
- f. This section concludes with Joseph and Mary's return to Nazareth and commentary by Luke on Jesus' growth and development. It was a long journey (80 miles) for the new parents and their child. Put yourself in the place of Joseph and Mary. What might you have talked about or reflected upon during this journey?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. Simeon and Anna are examples of faithful patience, waiting and trusting God. How can their examples speak to you? (Perhaps a clue for us is found in *how* they waited and *where* they waited.) What makes it difficult to wait and trust in our culture today?
- b. Simeon prophesied that Jesus would have a paradoxical effect on Israel—some would fall, some would rise. It has been said that when it comes to Jesus there can be no neutrality; we either surrender to him or we are at war with him.

When we respond to God's grace in Jesus and commit our lives to be his disciples we surrender to him. But life continues on. How do we sometimes find ourselves "at war" with Jesus even after we've surrendered to him? Are there any areas of your life that you need to surrender to Jesus now?

- c. In the Jewish culture elders were respected. Both Simeon and Anna were very old and, therefore, their words carried extra weight. But our culture—and even the Church—often ignores the elderly and places more value on youthfulness.

From which elderly people have you gained wisdom, either now or earlier in your life? Identify someone older than yourself whose wisdom and godliness you admire. Ask that person about their faith...and listen.

V. Pray

- a. Thank God for continued provision for our church and through our church. God has faithfully provided for us, enabling us to reach out with Christ's love and care to our congregation, community and world.
- b. Lift up those known to you who need God's touch, and ask God to help you see and respond to those who are hurting.
- c. Continue to pray for the deacons, elders, staff and pastors of Good Shepherd, as they seek to lead our community of faith.

Since there's room this week, here's a cartoon:



Baby bloopers in Bethlehem