

Something New Has Begun

Luke 2:22-40

Good Morning Church Family,

We are here on the last Sunday, the last day of 2023. Tomorrow will be 2024! Just saying that date out loud makes me think we should be driving around in flying cars, right? I feel like I was sold a false bill of goods about how the 2000s would play out.

Usually, around New Year's Eve, lots of people start thinking about change, or the beginning of something new. I'm not the sort of person who makes new year's resolutions, but January does feel like the time for fresh starts and new possibilities. In the scripture that Roger read for us this morning, we find four different people- Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna realizing that something new has begun, with the birth of this little baby, this God incarnate. And all four of those people, Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna respond to this newness in different ways. I think there is some good wisdom that we can glean from this story about new beginnings in our own lives and in the life of our church.

Sometimes, change or a new beginning is something that we choose, something that we have agency in. Choosing to move or buy a new home. Choosing to take a different job. Choosing to have another child. But more often than not, change or new beginnings

are foisted upon us. A diagnosis. A death. Jesus clearly called us to some big change. Lots of people I know have these before and after moments, some clear line that marks what was and what is now. More often than not, we don't choose that moment.

If we think of that idea in the context of the story of Mary and Joseph, it really is a series of new things happening and they are choosing to say yes to each of those new things. Bearing the son of God. Marrying your disgraced fiance because God tells you yes. Welcoming shepherds into a a stuffy little room where you have just given birth and see your newborn because they said a multitude of angels told them so! Talk about a story where things lots of things out of your control are happening. I heard someone say in a sermon that after the birth of Jesus, "everything was different, but nothing had changed." "Everything was different, but nothing had changed." Mary and Joseph made it home. They still ate the same food. The Shepherds still watched the same sheep. Mary and Joseph made plans to present their son and their offering at the temple, because that's what you did, when your firstborn son made his arrival.

The poet Maggie Smith, captures this strange surrealism about before/after divisions in her stunning memoir, "We Could Make This Place Beautiful." In the memoir, she recounts the breakdown of her marriage following her husbands and affair and how she learned to make as beautiful of a life as she could in the after.

In an interview on Kate Bowler's podcast, Maggie Smith says this,

Kate: "I guess maybe then we could start with the part where we feel exiled from the story of our choosing. We want to believe that we have all kinds of like life-as-a-series-of-choices control. And then most of what happens in our lives happens to us. So your story, like a lot of lovely people in this community, is one with a very crisp dividing line of before and after. I wondered if we could maybe start with what your life was like in the "before time."

Maggie: Yeah, it's funny, I think the before times felt very secure to me and sort of planned out. And as a type-A, firstborn daughter with a very sort of stolid Midwestern upbringing, I was like, "Oh, this is what you do, right?" You do this and then you do this and then you do this and okay, no, all those balls are in the air. I'm sure I can add another one into the mix and then another one and oh, look, they're still in the air. So I must be, "doing it right." And so my life, you know, in the before times was I was a writer, I was a wife. Eventually I was the mother and the mother of two children, a daughter and a son. So, you know, my life is a lot of caregiving.. So that was really the before and then the after. It's strange when I think about it, because most of those things are still the same. And it's actually really useful to think about that. Like, I think it's easy when life takes a big turn to be like, "Wow, I don't even recognize my life anymore. I thought it was one thing and now it's something else." But if I really move through the list of things I just gave you about my before life, the only thing missing is the spouse. I'm still doing the same work. I'm still parenting the same kids. I'm still living in the same house. So there's actually a lot of continuity for as bewildering as that shift was."

As Maggie Smith alludes to, change, shifts, and new beginnings will come, whether we want them to or not. The story of our lives will turn to the next chapter, and the next, as we make the journey through life. It would seem that the question is not IF life will change, if God will call us to something new, if our straight road will suddenly veer in a new direction, but when. When will change come? What will it look like? How will we respond? When I was younger, like a pre-teen/early teen, and people would talk about how Jesus changed everything, I always thought about the moment of conversion. The moment of saying yes to Jesus. But the more years I live, the more I think Jesus changes everything in my life again and again.

As venerated as the members of the Holy Family are, they were also real people. Nervous new parents bringing their baby to the temple. Mary, still trying to get the hang of nursing this baby. Joseph processing, How did this happen? How did a carpenter from Nazareth end up here?" Everything had changed, and their visit to the temple puts that realization at the forefront.

Mary and Joseph bring their 7 day old newborn son, Jesus, to the temple. Under Jewish law and custom, the first born son of every Jewish family is to be presented at the temple and an offering presented. They arrive at the temple, which is quite a large and lively place, there's lot of people there milling around, bringing in their own offerings, praying, worshiping and so on. These are not the images we know today of infant baptism, quiet and solemn with neatly groomed parents and babies in white gowns. This was a busy place.

One of the frequenters of the temple, Simon, was a man who walked closely with God

and was filled with the Holy Spirit. We're told that Simeon has heard from the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he has seen the Messiah. Simeon is elderly man, so I imagine he's been watching closely and waiting for this Messiah to appear at the temple. He can't live forever in this body; the Messiah is coming soon, he reasons. He feels compelled by the Spirit that day to go to the temple and wait. He sees this very young couple come through the entrance, a grunting bundle of a baby in the mothers arms and Simeon knows! He knows deep within him that this is it-the great change for Israel and indeed the world has begun. He approaches as quickly as his stiff joints will allow, "May I hold the baby?" "Uh...sure, yes. You may." Mary passes the little bundle to Simeon and his eyes well up. This moment he's been waiting for so long. "Simeon, took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child 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—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too." He passes the baby back and moves on, filled with joy. Something new has begun.

Mary, Joseph and Jesus don't make it much further into the temple before they meet Ana. Anna is a prophet, from the tribe of Asher. She's 82 years old, in a time where 60 years would have been considered a very long life. She lives at the temple, day and

night, she prays, worships and listens for the voice of God. She walked up to the young family and “began to praise God and began to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel.” Something new has begun.

In this Scripture, we’re watching in real time as four people respond to the beginning of something new. We know that as a church we are moving into something new this year. It’ll be a transition as I head to Pastor at Mount Royal and we discern where God may be leading LMF next. And I realize that my call to Mount Royal has foisted a change upon our church and that’s not easy. It wasn’t something we as the collective chose together. But as we think about this change, and really any of the other changes that we as group or family units or individuals will come into this year, we can aim to take a posture of welcome, and a posture of hope to those changes.

So, who are we in the story?

Are we Mary and Joseph? Asking how on earth we ended up here, grappling with how far this change reaches. Are we realizing who Jesus really is in all of this? Perhaps, like Mary, we’ve heard the hope in Simeon’s words that Jesus will bring the healing and hope that we long for, and at the same time hearing the words that following Jesus will pierce our own soul. Because allowing Jesus to heal the wounded places in our story may mean reopening the wound. Perhaps, like these new parents, we’re wondering where will this life with Jesus take us?

Or are we Simeon? Knowing that everything will change, ready, waiting, watching, and anticipating. Knowing that new life can also mean death, and trusting all that to God. We

have seen what Jesus can do, and we are revealing in that hope? Will Jesus call forth in us a revealing of our own hearts, as Simeon said Jesus would for the people of Israel? We've seen the before and we're ready, so ready for the after, for the next chapter.

Or are we Anna? Advanced in our years, yet faithful to the space that we're called to serve and worship in. Anna had followed God's lead through lots of different seasons. A married woman. A long time widow. A prophet. A constant presence in the temple. Her response to this cataclysmic change that took the form of a squishy newborn? Praising God. She offered thanks for what God was doing. Even though she, like Simeon, were dreaming of a future that they would not see. Laboring for a future that would not be hers.

Who are we in the story? Likely, we're all three at one time or another. Scared and hopeful. Resisting and submitting. Praising and fretting. We are just humans encountering something new in Jesus Christ, just as Mary, Joseph, Simon and Anna were human. We're stepping out of before and into after. Following the God who promises to be with us even to the very end of the age.

To Close this morning, I'd like to share a blessing written by Kate Bowler.

This is called, "A Blessing for the Lives we Didn't Choose."

Blessed are we in the tender place between curiosity and dread,

We who wonder how to be whole,
when dreams have disappeared and part of us with them,
where mastery, control, determination, bootstrapping, and grit,
are consigned to the realm of before (where most of the world lives),
in the fever dream that promises infinite choices, unlimited progress, best life now.

Blessed are we in the after,
forced into stories we never would have written.

Far outside of answers to questions we even know to ask.

God, show us a glimmer of possibility in this new constraint,
that small truths will be given back to us.

We are held.

We are safe.

We are loved.

We are loved.

We are loved.