

What Child is This?

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Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Luke 2:22-40

One of the things I like best about myself is my efficiency. I can get lots of things done in short periods of time and done well. One of the things I like least about myself is my efficiency. My focused task orientation can keep me from enjoying the task and freely engaging with those around me. Like last Sunday—Christmas Day. Things got off to a fine start with Anjali waking up about 6:45 am and ready to head down to the tree to open gifts. Cheri, my folks and I all joined her and had great fun watching her joy and excitement. But after our time around the tree, I had many tasks ahead of me: taking care of breakfast; final preparations for worship and leading worship; fixing my part of the Christmas dinner for our family, my folks and two additional guests and cleaning up afterward; taking Cheri to work in Baltimore and putting Anjali to bed. Before Christmas dinner was served, I was beginning to unravel. As Cheri pointed out to me, I was very task-oriented, stressed out and tense. She suggested that I should chill out and just go with the flow. For me that's much easier said than done, but very gradually I was able to go with the flow.

Richard Rohr says that spiritual growth in the second half of life is different than for the first half. In the first half of life, according to Rohr and others, spiritual growth usually happens in areas of your greatest strengths, learning how to nurture and channel these God-given gifts in healthy and positive ways. In the second half of life, spiritual growth occurs more in your areas of weakness, the parts of you that are not so gifted or the flip side of the parts of you that are strong, like the flip side of my efficiency. Unless I live to be at least 120 years old, I guess I'm in the second half of my life. That probably means, in part, that spiritual growth for me will occur in my ability to increasingly go with the flow.

I would not have been a likely candidate for God to call to the task given to Simeon and Anna. They truly needed to go with the flow. Their lives seem so foreign to the notion of lives well-lived, filled with accomplishments and successes, bearing much fruit. These two people, quite elderly at the point in their lives Luke related to us this morning, have spent inordinate amounts of time simply waiting, looking for the fulfillment of a single promise. Anna married young and became a childless widow seven years later. From that point to the age of eighty-four, she had done little more than pray and fast in the temple. Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah, and so he, like Anna, spent the bulk of his life looking toward the future.

After years of waiting, the appointed day arrived. Sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, Simeon was ready to welcome God's anointed one. Shaped by a life of being present to God in worship, Anna recognized that the promise had arrived in the form of an infant being presented in the temple.

Following centuries of tradition, Mary and Joseph went to the temple to present Jesus to God for circumcision, performed by the priests. They gave the priest two small birds for payment, the price the poor people paid, and Jesus was circumcised. To the priest it was probably no big deal. Jesus may have been the seventh or seventieth boy he circumcised that day. After performing the rite, the priest handed Jesus back to his parents.

But for Simeon and Anna, Jesus' presence that day was a big deal indeed. Separately, guided by God's Spirit, they approached the parents and the babe, with Simeon arriving first. Walking up to Mary and Joseph, he reached down and took the infant from his mother's arms. A total stranger to these new parents simply walked up and grabbed Jesus from her mother's arms.

Prior to five years ago this month, I would have considered that act on Simeon's part to be no big deal, but it has a different meaning to me now. In January 2001, Cheri

and I arrived in India about two weeks before we were to pick up Anjali, then 8 ½ months old, to bring her back to our home as a new family. We thought two weeks was plenty of time to complete paperwork and details, but it wasn't until a few hours before our scheduled departure that Anjali was given to us. We had just enough time to eat in the hotel restaurant before heading to the airport. Within minutes of sitting at our table, a total stranger came over to us and picked up Anjali from Cheri's arms and began walking around the dining area, showing her to others around the restaurant. Startled and bug-eyed, we both sprang up from our table and approached her, not having a clue as to what was going on. Seeing that we were not from India, the woman realized that we weren't aware of the custom among Indian people to do what she had just done. She smiled and returned her to us.

I can only guess as to what Mary and Joseph felt when this old man lifted the baby from its mother's arms, held him in his own arms and began praising God and prophesying about their child's life. Maybe they weren't as startled and fearful as Cheri and I were, but I wouldn't be surprised. Luke does tell us they were amazed—amazed by what Simeon said. You would think they had gotten used to that sort of thing by then. Whether angels, shepherds or magi, perfect strangers had been showing up to tell them who their baby was, but Luke tells us they were still amazed.

Looking deeply into Jesus' eyes, Simeon cried out with joy: *"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 revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."* At that moment Anna came and also saw the babe. She, too, praised God and spoke to anyone who would listen about this very special child whose life would be lived for the redemption of Jerusalem.

But it was Simeon who raised a dark specter. Turning to Mary, he told her the rest of the truth about her son: *"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."* Simeon was saying that a

bright light casts deep shadows. As many who would rejoice to learn who Jesus was, just as many would grind their teeth against him. Simeon knew that when the child grew up, he would not only bring comfort and joy, but fear and trembling.

Last Wednesday I went to see “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,” the Disney production of the first of seven books in C.S. Lewis’ *The Chronicles of Narnia*. I read the entire set some years ago and apparently Disney is planning on producing annual film versions of all seven books. It was visually quite fascinating and pretty true to the book, except for one part. As you may know, “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” features the four Pevensie siblings—Peter, Susan, Edmond and Lucy—is set in England in 1941. Their mother sent them out of London during the Blitz to live in the countryside with a professor whose personality resembles Lewis’. While exploring his huge house, the children, ranging in age from about seven to about sixteen, accidentally discover that the back of a wardrobe opens into a mystical realm called Narnia where they encounter all manner of strange creatures as well as evil and good, principally and respectively portrayed by an enslaving White Witch and a redeeming Christ-like lion named Aslan.

The movie version is visually stimulating, imaginative and generally enthralling, but I was quite disappointed with one part and I feel many people may come away from the movie missing a central thrust of the book and Christianity. Near the end of the movie is a rather lengthy segment in which Aslan’s forces and the White Witches’ forces do battle and the horrible creatures of the White Witch are slain by the Aslan’s army headed by Peter Pevensie. I say Aslan’s forces guardedly because, while Aslan was present at the end, he did not assemble or lead the army—he was far away, slain by the White Witch and later resurrected. At least fifteen or twenty minutes is devoted to this triumph of good over evil and I fear that’s what audiences unfamiliar with Lewis will come away with, almost like a Rambo film or a Western in which the good ones in the end defeat the evil ones. In the book, the battle scene occupies all of two paragraphs.

Lewis' theology was anything but triumphalistic. In 1951 Winston Churchill offered to make Lewis a commander of the British Empire, but Lewis declined. He feared that the supposed honor bestowed by the conservative government would essentially label his work, as Lewis put it, "covert anti-Leftist propaganda." Referring to the Crusades and colonialism, in Lewis' "The Four Loves," he laments crimes committed by Christians and calls believers to make "full confession...of Christendom's specific contribution to the sum of human cruelty and treachery. Large areas of the world will not hear us till we have publicly disowned much of our past."

So I fear something much clearer in the book and more subtly present in the movie will be missed because of the prominence of the battle scene. The heart of the story lies instead in a question Susan asks Mr. and Mrs. Beaver after they tell the children about Aslan. She asks, "Is Aslan a safe lion?" Mr. Beaver replies matter-of-factly, "*Course he isn't safe. But he's good.*" Aslan unites two important and opposing qualities, which Lewis' narrator puts this way: "*People who have never been to Narnia sometimes think that a thing cannot be good and terrible at the same time.*" For the children, Aslan is both a frightening and benevolent lion, and they surrender themselves to Aslan and Aslan's love. But for the White Witch and her followers, holding together the good and the terrible at the same time is not a possibility and they resist him with all of their might.

I think that is very much what Simeon is saying to Mary. This child is destined for the rise and fall of many—and to be a sign that many will welcome but to also be a sign that many will oppose. This child is both safe and fearful, both good and terrible.

After Simeon and Anna left Mary and Joseph, Luke simply tells us that "*they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth and that the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.*" But I can easily imagine that on their way back home, Mary and Joseph's joy was heavily mixed with confusion and anxiety and that they asked themselves the question: What child is this? What child is this? Who are we raising and who will he become?

And that is the question I want to leave with each of us this morning. What child is this? What child is this who has come to us again this Christmas? When Peter Pevensie found out that Aslan isn't safe but is good, he responded with genuine excitement: "I'm longing to see [Aslan] even if I do feel frightened when it comes to the point."

In this New Year, do you long for the comfort he brings? Do you open yourself to his fearful presence?

*What child is this who laid to rest on Mary's lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet, while shepherds watch are keeping?
Why lies he in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?
Good Christians, fear, for sinners here, the silent Word is pleading.
Nails, spear shall pierce him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.
Hail, hail the Word made flesh, the babe, the son of Mary.*