

## FIRST SUNDAY IN CHRISTMAS 2020 B

How many of you have gone to the movies recently? This year movies have been replaced by PERIOD MINI SERIES. Those who watch these programs with regularity know that none of the opening incidents are incidental. One dare not ignore any of them. All of scenes will be important for the story that is about to unfold. Often, if the program is re-run at a later date, the viewer who watches it for the second time realizes the significance of some or all of these opening sequences in ways that were not initially appreciated.

What has any of this got to do with an old man and a baby and the Great Temple in Jerusalem in BCE 4? Just this. The writer of Luke's gospel story has embedded clues in his narrative. They aren't immediately apparent to the reader or the hearer. One may ask why some of these details even need to be in the story — or whether they are throwaway ornaments, simply inserted in order to make the story sound more interesting.

Don't be deceived. Luke knows what he's doing. Everything is there for a reason. Luke is the only gospel writer who gives us a story about two elderly seekers who frequent the national shrine of the Jewish church. That in it's self is a clue. Luke cares about vulnerable people. No one is more vulnerable than an aging man and an equally aged woman, nearing life's end.

One could view Simeon and Anna as has-beens, people whose years have nearly run out and who don't matter anymore. Luke presents them to us as individuals who have something to contribute, even in — or perhaps, especially because of — old age. This concern for the vulnerable elderly surfaces again in Luke's second book of scripture, the Acts of the Apostles, where the first faith community in Jerusalem, devises a system to care for aging widows.

But the story of Simeon and Anna contains another clue to this gospel writer's priorities. Luke wants to introduce to his readers and hearers, **including us**, a theme that will return many more times in his story. Arguably, we already heard this theme in Luke's version of the story of Jesus' birth. Only in Luke do we have a story about shepherds — marginalized, unimportant, scruffy castoffs, definitely NOT at the HEIGHT of "respectable society" — but now elevated to a place of great importance. **THE ANGELS CAME TO THEM!**

The theme sounded in today's Gospel mirrors this 'lifting up' of lowly people. It comes in a sentence spoken by Simeon, one that many readers of this story are inclined to dismiss as unimportant — or perhaps no more than the rambling thoughts of a senile old codger. Don't be deceived. When Luke adds a detail to his story, he puts it there for a reason. What Simeon has to say is not unimportant.

Here's what Simeon says about Jesus, who is still a **defenseless infant**. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." Does that really make any sense? Is it supposed to?

Simeon's cryptic words to Jesus' parents amount to what some teachers of literature would call **foreshadowing**. Luke will raise this theme again, many times, in his gospel. At this point, early in the story, the reader or hearer is getting a heads up. **A PREVIEW OF COMING ATTRACTIONS!**

When a story-teller uses foreshadowing, he or she is saying to us, who read or hear the story, "Don't be surprised about what's coming. I've given you clues. You've been warned."

SO, what's the meaning of 'the falling and rising of many' about which Simeon speaks? Luke spells it out later on, most dramatically in a parable about an obscenely wealthy man who lives in a walled mansion. In the street outside his gate lies a

starving beggar. Will the overfed rich man make a move to help feed the beggar? Not on his life. Luke uses the parable to illustrate what for him is a key truth about social standing. Jesus calls it TURNING THE TABLES—a Godly REVERSAL OF FORTUNES.

The tables are turned and everything is reversed in the parable of the rich man and the starving beggar. The rich man goes to hell and can't even get a drink of water to cool his tongue. The beggar goes to heaven and can't begin to eat all the food that's set before him. The rich man doesn't realize his poverty.

Jesus went about, according to Luke, teaching and preaching GODLY REVERSAL—like angels coming to MIGHTY SHEPHERDS! Since we know that's a key theme in Luke, we can now make sense of Simeon's words in the Jerusalem Temple, to Jesus' parents: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed."

Jesus' mission is to preach and promise reversal. And when he does that, there will be significant pushback. The final result will be crucifixion, something that Simeon promises will pierce his mother's soul. According to Luke, that's what happened to Mary!

The message to you and me is to look for opportunities to help REVERSE HOW PEOPLE ARE PERCEIVED. That doesn't mean that we'll be allowed to gorge ourselves in Heaven—I think I already did that with all the chocolates that some have given me! Instead, the promise is, simply, that we will have a role in ushering in God's peace and healing, and will have the satisfaction of knowing that we were and are way-clearers for the in-breaking of the reign of **God in our midst**. The reign of God is not somewhere out there, in the distant future. It's here--NOW. It has begun. And we can be a part of it, right now. Rejoice and be glad! AND SHARE LIKE YOU CARE!

And all of God's ESSENTIAL CHARACTERS said...AMEN!