

“How does a Weary World Rejoice? We Root Ourselves in Ritual”
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Friends of Christ,

This morning we find ourselves halfway through the 12 days of Christmas. This is our 6th sermon in our advent and Christmas series asking the question, “how does a weary world rejoice?”

The answer to the question for this week is, “we root ourselves in ritual.”

I wonder how that strikes you?

I suspect that for many of us, we are suspicious of the word ritual. Ritual carries all kinds of baggage for us. Right of the bat, it might just come across as culty or conspiratorial. Like when we hear about “secret rituals” it has a kind of unsettling mystery about it, doesn’t it? Or in a more mundane sense we might think of the term “ritualistic” which is usually used negatively. On the other end of the spectrum from mysterious and culty, we might associate rituals with a dull and repetitive religion. Think of phrases like “going through the motions” or the snarky remark that “tradition is just peer pressure from dead people”

And so, because of our rugged individualism or our constant quest for innovation and novelty, American culture largely did away with rituals. We saw them as too rigid, too formal, too inauthentic, not innovative enough, not personalized enough, not meaningful enough. Bringing it to a church context, protestants are often nervous about rituals because they seem too “legalistic” or “too catholic”

And yet, we find ourselves this morning in the gospel of Luke, reading about all of the rituals that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus do after Christmas morning. So let’s look there and see if there isn’t something there for us to learn about rituals.

Let’s stand for the reading of the gospel:

Luke 2:20-38

²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

²¹ On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

²² When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"^[b]), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."^[c]

²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss^[d] your servant in peace.

³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel."

³³ The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.^[e] She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

This is the word of the Lord,
Thanks be to God

Mary and Joseph perform at least five rituals in this passage: There is circumcision and naming of Jesus on the eighth day, this would have been done in their religious community, surrounded by family. After the rituals of circumcision and naming, the holy family took the short journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to the temple to complete the presentation of Jesus at the temple, a purification sacrifice, and finally a consecration of Jesus to the Lord. We can't get into all the details about these rituals, what I think is particularly important for us is that Jesus' family is dedicated to the rituals of the Jewish law and obedience to God more broadly.

But also, rituals like this are often meant to be practices that help us transition from one stage of life to another. Think of baptisms, quencenieras and bar mitzvahs, graduations, weddings, funerals, etc. We often put rituals in places where we need to make some meaning of what is happening to us. What does it mean to be a child of God, what does it mean to become an adult, what does it mean and how can I cope when someone I have loved and relied on dies. Rituals help us make sense of these things. They assure us that we aren't alone, others have gone through this before us, and we can get through it to. Without a funeral, many people wouldn't know how to grieve the passing of a loved one, the script of a funeral is so helpful.

There is a sense in which the rituals in our passage are a blend of the ordinary and expected alongside the extraordinary and unexpected. What Luke tells us about Jesus' first days is what every Jewish boy would have gone through at this time. Luke stresses this in his retelling, he repeats phrases like, "as the law of Moses requires" and "they did this in keeping with what it says in the law."

The emphasis in the first part of our story this morning is on the normality and conformity of the holy family to the law. There is no special treatment for Jesus in this sense. Even though he is the son of God, born to be the king and savior of the world, welcomed by hosts of angels, etc. He still goes through all the same rituals as the average baby born in this place at this time.

And yet, the extraordinary and unexpected happens too. These two characters Simeon and Anna burst onto the scene, marveling over and praising the baby Jesus. What was supposed to be a simple ritual with no surprises, nothing unexpected has turned into quite a scene. If Mary and Joseph hadn't already been visited by the angel Gabriel and the Shepherds praising their baby as glad tidings of great joy, they would probably think these folks were eccentric at best. Imagine bringing your child to a baptism, or attending a baptism, where someone just bursts

out proclaiming that your child was God's salvation and that now they could die in peace because they have seen what had been promised.

But I think that this brings us to our crucial question this morning and that is, how does this in any way answer our question, "how does a weary world rejoice?"

Rituals:

Our answer for this morning is that we root ourselves in ritual. David Brooks in an article for the New York Times had this to say about rituals, "Rituals provide comfort because they remind us we're not alone. Billions of people have done this before as part of the timeless passages of life. Rituals also comfort because they concretize spiritual experiences."

I think that it is very likely that Mary and Joseph needed these rituals more than most people. We get such a small sliver of their story as parents. I imagine that they were full of joy and admiration at their place in the story of salvation. And at the same time I wonder what kind of unsettling questions they had? I know that as a parent myself I can tie myself up in knots worrying, am I doing it right? Am I raising a person who is loved, well-adjusted, and equipped to handle all that the world will inevitably throw at them. You feel a massive amount of responsibility in moments like that.

Mary and Joseph had a different situation altogether. How do you raise a Messiah? How do you raise the son of God? It's not like they were given a blueprint for how the story was going to unfold. They only knew that this was "God with us." And that all the world would be saved through this baby boy.

And so I imagine that these rituals were deeply comforting for them. You can imagine them telling themselves, "ok, I know how to do this part. I have a script for this part." Like the quote from Brooks says, rituals remind us that we aren't alone and they make our spiritual experiences tangible. Sometimes, especially in times of uncertainty, you need something you can see, smell, taste, or touch to mark an important moment in your life. In times of transition, grief, joy, hope, or really any other human experience, rooting yourself in a ritual can provide a concrete story that you can enter into. This is my story now. I know everyone else had a sweet sixteen, but this is my sweet sixteen, this is what it means for me to start transitioning into adulthood.

I do want to address some of the concerns that rituals are somehow "inauthentic" or that they inevitably lead to people "going through the motions." I am by no means saying that every

ritual is created equal or that even really good rituals can't lose their vibrancy. However, I do think that we need a reframe in regards to our rituals. I think that rituals should be seen as similar to improvisation in music. I know this is a well-worn analogy, but it may be cliché for a very good reason. Folks often think that people who improv in something like jazz are just free-spirited and intuitive people who are simply so talented that they don't need structure or rules. They can transcend those things by their raw musical talent and connection to the music. But this is simply not the reality. Folks who can beautifully break the rules, have spent decades perfecting the rules first. Improv is an interplay between mastering the structure and breaking the structure.

I think that rituals can function a lot like this. Think of our story from today. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus follow the well-worn path of the sacred rituals of their culture and tradition. However, in front of the backdrop of those tried and true practices, something fresh and unexpected happens with Simeon and Anna. Something that is not initially unique and personal to them, becomes personal and significant.

Rituals have a general structure, like how music has scales and tempo. Rules in other words. But ritual is practiced by individuals who bring their own unique stories to the ritual, similar to how a musician might improvise.

We might use a similar order of service for each funeral, but every funeral is totally unique because the life lived was unique, the people doing the remembering and grieving are unique. They are taking a script, one that has been used a billion times, and adding their lives into it.

So I want to reflect on with three ways we can root ourselves in ritual a little better in the coming year.

First, we can engage in the rituals that we already know and already love. For instance, coming to church involves ritual. Every week we follow a very similar structure here. We have a call to worship, confession, assurance of forgiveness, we pass the peace that comes from that forgiveness, we hear the word of God preached, we respond to the gospel in the offering, and we get charged and blessed to go out into the world in peace and love. Sometimes we have baptisms, we take communion, we celebrate advent and lent. These are all rituals that we already engage in. But, just because we do it often, and just because it follows a certain pattern, doesn't somehow make it impersonal or inauthentic. We experience this all the time. We have rituals with our loved ones, we might have traditions that we love during the holidays and they are special because they have a certain structure and rhythm and we all revolt when

they are changed. Often if a ritual has lost its meaning it means that we need to be more intentional about it. We need to investigate why we do the things we do.

Second, we can deepen or rediscover rituals around us. Let's take Christmas as our example. This year, our family really upped our advent calendar game. We had the chocolates in years past, but this year we added these little story books. Just a couple sentences each day, that told the whole lead up to the Christmas story for my daughter Naomi. Every day we would sit down pull out the chocolates, read one of the little stories, and mommy and daddy also had an advent calendar with different teas for each day. We made it a bigger deal, we deepened the advent calendar ritual that was already there. We also asked other families what their family traditions were around Christmas and incorporated those as well.

Christmas is a remarkably meaningful and beautiful season, rituals can be a way to participate in the story in a concrete way. Christmas can go beyond being a story we know about, and in some way become our story as well.

Third, and finally, we can create new rituals that help ourselves, our families, our friends, and our communities make meaning of transitions, losses, and celebrations. For instance, we need more rituals around life events for single people. People who get married and have kids have a million rituals that bind them to their communities. Engagement parties, bridal parties, rehearsal dinners, premarital counseling, the wedding itself when you invite everyone important to you to a big party to celebrate and support you and the list goes on. Getting married, at least for Hannah and me, set us up for adulthood, people gathered around us, gave us really great life advice, and through our registry bought us all our kitchen supplies and dishes etc. But life doesn't begin with marriage, plenty of people don't get married, and yet we don't have equivalent practices where we gather around people emerging into adulthood. What would it look like if we made rituals for the needs of our communities, for the type of life we are living now?

There are all kinds of life events that would benefit from a ritual. When someone moves houses, when someone is declared cancer free, when a parent becomes an empty nester, when parents get divorced, when someone accomplishes something they are really proud of, when a kid is bullied or when your kid is the bully, when a church closes, or on the date of your baptism celebrated almost like a birthday.

We have opportunities to build practices that mark these major transitions or moments. Rituals often have an element of looking back on something, whether happy or sad, commemorating that, and then it provides us the opportunity to move forward.

As we enter the new year many of us might be planning our years, including making personal goals and resolutions. Let's add these three steps, engaging in the rituals in front of us, deepening or rediscovering rituals around us, and creating brand new ones when we see the need.

Let's use these rituals as opportunities to love God, ourselves, and our neighbors better.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.