

Our reading this morning from Luke's gospel picks up right after our Christmas Eve story. Mary and Joseph have presumably returned from Bethlehem to Nazareth, and then when the baby is 8 days old, they named him Jesus as they had been instructed by the angel and they had him circumcised. Then when he was only 40 days old, they load up the mini van and head on down to Jerusalem. Like all observant Jewish families of the day, they presented themselves at the Temple for purification., and they offered a sacrifice of 2 turtle doves. I read this story in Luke and wonder if the 2 turtle doves in the 12 Days of Christmas come from this passage. Surely it must.

But Luke's original audience would have wondered something else. ***"Turtle doves? Why didn't they sacrifice a lamb?"***

Here are the directions in Leviticus 12:6-8: "When the days of her purification are completed, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. The priest shall offer it before the Lord and make atonement on her behalf. . . . If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for the sin offering. . . ."

So without saying "Mary and Joseph were very poor", Luke lets the readers know that by offering two turtle doves instead of a lamb and a turtle dove, Mary and Joseph were very poor.

There are preachers who will tell you that if you have faith, you will be financially prosperous. They have found a few verses in Scripture that support this "prosperity gospel" and it appears to be making these preachers prosperous, at least.

Our culture wants this prosperity gospel to be true, because the American dream is not built on finding the blessings in poverty. But you will not hear a prosperity gospel from me.

Because if Joseph and Mary had faith enough to listen to the angel, to bring God's own son into the world, and to be obedient enough to take him to the Temple to obey the Laws of Moses, then they should have been prosperous beyond measure. Yet this couple couldn't even afford to buy a lamb for the sacrifice. So any claims that faith will make you rich, any "prosperity gospel", is nonsense. Because if God's own family was apparently struggling to get by, then we need to reconsider the connection between being ***blessed*** and being ***prosperous***.

Americans often use those words as synonyms. We should resist that inclination. Because Joseph and Mary are about as blessed as you can be. Literally.

Simeon, about whom we only know what Luke tells us, has been led by the Spirit to the Temple. He had been waiting for the consolation of Israel.

What an odd scene it must have been at the Temple. This old man standing at the doors, watching people going in and out. . . . "Is it them? No. What about that baby over there? No. Excuse me, ma'am, can I take a look at your child? Never mind, I mistook you for someone else."

When Mary and Joseph walk in the doors of the temple, the Spirit helps Simeon know he's found the right family, despite the two turtle doves in Joseph's hands, and Simeon takes the baby Jesus and blesses him. "Lord, 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."

Yes, any connection between being blessed and being prosperous are hard to see in this text. I wish I had been at the Temple myself that day, or was at least able to ask Luke to give us some more details. Because here's what I want to know. What did Simeon do after he had

spoken his blessing? After he realized that the family of God's own son was in financial need. Did he do something more for the family than SPEAK a blessing? Did he do anything to BE a blessing for them? Did he take them to a Subway restaurant to make sure they had dinner before they headed back to Nazareth?

I trust that anyone who was led by the Spirit as Simeon was would have done something to alleviate their immediate hardship. But Luke doesn't give us those details. So we have to figure out how to be blessings on our own. We also have to figure out how to separate ***blessing*** from ***financial prosperity***.

Here is an illustration of a Simeon like blessing from a football game

in Grapevine, Texas. It was Grapevine Faith vs. Gainesville State School, as told by Rick Reilly at ESPN.com.¹

"This all started when Faith's head coach, Kris Hogan, wanted to do something kind for the Gainesville team. Faith had never played Gainesville, but he already knew the score. After all, Faith was 7-2 going into the game, Gainesville 0-8 with 2 TDs all year. Faith has 70 kids, 11 coaches, the latest equipment and involved parents. Gainesville has a lot of kids with convictions for drugs, assault and robbery—many of whose families had disowned them—wearing seven-year-old shoulder pads and ancient helmets. Gainesville State is a maximum-security correctional facility 75 miles north of Dallas. Every game it plays is on the road.

So Hogan had this idea. What if half of our fans—for one night only—cheered for the other team? He sent out an email asking the Faithful to do just that. "Here's the message I want you to send:" Hogan wrote. "You are just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth."

Some people were naturally confused. One Faith player walked into Hogan's office and asked, "Coach, why are we doing this?"

And Hogan said, "Imagine if you didn't have a home life. Imagine if everybody had pretty much given up on you. Now imagine what it would mean for hundreds of people to suddenly believe in you."

Next thing you know, the Gainesville Tornados were turning around on their bench to see something they never had before. Hundreds of fans. And actual cheerleaders!

More than 200 Faith fans sat on the Gainesville side and kept cheering the Gainesville players on—by name.

And even though Faith walloped them 33-14, the Gainesville kids were so happy that after the game they gave head coach Mark Williams a sideline squirt-bottle shower like he'd just won state.

It was a strange experience for boys who most people cross the street to avoid. "We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games," says Gerald, a lineman who will wind up doing more than three years. "You can see it in their eyes. They're lookin' at us like we're criminals. But these people, they were yellin' for us! By our names!"

¹ Rick Reilly, "Life of Reilly" Espn.com
<http://sports.espn.go.com/espnmag/story?section=magazine&id=3789373>

After the game, both teams gathered in the middle of the field to pray and that's when a kid named Isaiah surprised everybody by asking to lead. "We had no idea what the kid was going to say," remembers Coach Hogan. But Isaiah said this: "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there was so many people in the world that cared about us."

As the Tornados walked back to their bus under guard, they each were handed a bag for the ride home—a burger, some fries, a soda, some candy, a Bible and an encouraging letter from a Faith player.

The Gainesville coach saw Hogan, grabbed him hard by the shoulders and said, "You'll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You'll never, ever know."

And as the bus pulled away, all the Gainesville players crammed to one side and pressed their hands to the window, staring at these people they'd never met before, watching their waves and smiles disappearing into the night."

That, my friends, is an illustration of being a blessing, of showing that every child you meet is a gift, not just the child who was born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago. Perhaps if we want our Advent waiting to pay off, we should, like Simeon and like that football coach in Texas, start blessing all of the children that the Spirit puts in our lives.

Amen.