

December 31st, 2023

Luke 2:21-38 “We Root Ourselves”

I’ve been reading a lot of books lately about the history of trends in American churches. There’s always a section in these books that asks, “How and when has the church been stuck, and what has the church done in response?” Remember, that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is the first American-born Protestant denomination, so it stands to reason that we might have a few things to say about the matter. Our answer to this question is, “The Protestant church got stuck in all the tired old rituals and traditions of the European churches and then we brought them over to America with us. Therefore, we need to leave the old European traditions and rituals behind and get back to the basics by reclaiming and restoring the early New Testament Church.” Heck yeah! Sounds great, right? The Protestant Church was so divided in Europe that the Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, and Quakers were at each other’s throats, pointing fingers and claiming that they were the only ones doing church right. Then our founders Alexander Campbell, Thomas Campbell and Barton Stone all said, “Let’s leave all that stuff behind and start over fresh and just call ourselves Christians. We’ll start with the Lord’s table. We’ll have it so that anyone that confesses that Jesus is the Christ as the Son of the Living God can take communion instead of subscribing to some denominationally specific creed. In fact, let’s just throw creeds out the window altogether, open up the Lord’s table, get rid of bishops and denominations and let the elders in our churches share the ministry with clergy. Ooh, and here’s what we’ll say: ‘We aren’t the only Christians, we’re Christians only!’ Sound good? Everyone on board?” Yeah? Can I get a witness? And how long do you suppose it took before we were up to our necks in new stodgy traditions and rituals? Our founders had barely passed away before our church split for the first time!

Reformation never comes easy. Change never comes easy. And it doesn’t take long at all to get stuck. I came to faith in the early 1980s. I came in on the tail end of the Jesus movement that started back in the late 1960s.

All the hippies that were tired of all the old traditions of the mainline churches said, “We’ve had enough of your smells and bells and stodgy old songs and rituals! We’re not an institution, we’re a revolution man! Jesus calls us to be radicals!” See, I didn’t really know much about the “old ways” because I didn’t come to faith in the walls of a church. I came to faith in Youth for Christ, a para-church youth organization founded by Torrey Johnson and Billy Graham. My Campus Life leader, Greg Johnson, told me that I needed to find a church. Campus Life was not a church. I had to find a community of faith to help me grow and mature in my newfound faith. So I started shopping around. I went to probably a dozen churches – some old-school mainline churches, some radical, charismatic churches and others somewhere in between. I eventually settled down in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) because the spotlight was always on Jesus and they encouraged me to ask questions. The Disciples is where I found my call to ministry and where I decided to dedicate my life to showing others the way of Christ. How cool is that? I found my faith in a radical Jesus-movement-era youth program and I found my call to ministry in the first American-born Protestant Denomination! Aren’t I just the little rebel?

Here's something I learned early on though. It doesn't matter how radical and anti-traditional you think you are. Someone is always going to tell you that you're an old fuddy-duddy. Someone is always going to make fun of your ways. Someone is always going to say, “Okay, Boomer.” Drives me crazy when my kids and their friends say that. “Okay, Boomer.” I tell them, “I’m not a Boomer. I’m Generation X!” And they say, “Whatever.” And I say, “No, ‘whatever’ is my line because that’s what Generation X says!” “Okay Boomer.” Here’s something that I learned about the ones who are quick to ridicule and complain about how old you are. Those people are just as tied up in traditions and rituals as they think you are. Here’s the best way to put this to the test. Volunteer to be a camp counselor or a camp director some time. Go ahead! It’s fun. Camp is awesome. And while you’re directing or counseling camp try introducing something new to these self-proclaimed non-traditionalists. Say, “Hey there campers, let’s close

campfire circle tonight with this song my friend Andra wrote called, *Lullaby*.” “But we always sing, *We Bid You Goodnight*.” “Oh yeah, I know that song too. That’s a good one. Classic Grateful Dead. But let me teach you this song that Andra taught me. It’s a great song to close campfire circle with. We learned it at CYF Camp in Virginia.” “Well that’s fine for CYF Camp in Virginia, but this is CYF Camp in Northern California. We like *We Bid You Goodnight*.” “Yes, and again ... I do too. In fact, I’ve used that song on many occasions. But let’s *try* this new one.” “Okay, fine but *We Bid You Goodnight* has to be the last song we sing.” “Why?” “Because we can’t go to bed unless we sing, *We Bid You Goodnight*.” “Wait ... what? Why can’t you go to bed if you don’t sing *We Bid You Goodnight*?” And they say, “Because it’s?” TRADITION! Keep in mind, these are high schoolers whose chief complaint about their home churches is, “too many tired old rituals and traditions!” But, whatever.

We throw the words “tradition” and “ritual” around almost interchangeably, but let’s talk about how they’re related but different. Both have a place in the church, and both are important for similar reasons. In grammatical terms, a *tradition* refers to the passing down of customs and beliefs from one generation to the next. A *ritual*, on the other hand, is a series of actions performed in a prescribed order, that is often embedded in a larger symbolic system or tradition like a religion. So as strange as this sounds, a ritual can be traditional. Are you following me? The scripture that Dave read this morning is about Mary and Joseph taking their child Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem when he is only 8 days old. They did this so they could enact the sacred birth rituals of their culture and tradition. While they are participating in this traditional ritual, the unexpected occurs. A man named Simeon is led by the Holy Spirit into the temple to proclaim Jesus as the “light of revelation.” Then, a prophet named Anna suddenly approaches them and she too praises God and speaks about Jesus to everyone who is “longing for redemption.” This is a powerful moment in Jesus’ birth story because right in the middle of a traditional ritual, these two people come in and do something completely unconventional. As weird as this is going to

sound, it would almost be like attending a birthday party where everyone is supposed to gather around the person they're celebrating, present them with a cake that has candles on it, sing "Happy Birthday to You," let them blow out the candles and then open presents and eat the cake. What happened at the temple with Mary and Joseph might be compared to a birthday party where everything is set up as it's supposed to be, but instead of bringing in a cake with candles, someone brings in a live goat in a green sweater and sings Jimmy Buffet's "Trip Around the Sun" instead. It would cause most of the people in the room to say, "Wait, that's not the way we're supposed to do this!" But others might say, "Well ... this is different, but why not?"

Rituals mark sacred turning points in our lives. They can help us make meaning of celebrations, losses, and transitions. As new parents to Jesus, Mary and Joseph may have been feeling weary about what had happened so far and for what might lie ahead. But I'd like to think that these sacred rituals—and those who bear witness to them—bolster them and give them the courage they need for the journey even if it was a little unconventional.

Here's the first set of questions I want you all to consider this morning since we've spent the season asking questions -- How do our sacred rituals root us and help us live into new chapters of our lives with courage? Can rituals bring meaning to our lives when our futures are deeply uncertain? Can new rituals help us make meaning of confusing, ambiguous, daunting, or difficult chapters in our lives? What are the unexpected blessings that can come from ritual acts? How does ritual connect us more deeply to our communities? I think these are good questions to ask as we enter the new year. What are some rituals that we'd like to hold on to? What are some rituals that we'd like to set aside? What are some new rituals that we're willing to try that might become part of our tradition as a church?

Think about all the rituals that we're familiar with and participate in: Weddings, baptisms, funerals, dedications, graduations, and the like.

What are some life events that *don't* have a ritual, but need one? Like when someone suffers a miscarriage, when someone moves, when someone retires, when a patient is declared “cancer-free,” when partners get divorced, when someone changes their name. What are new rituals that could mark these moments? Think about a time when you’ve experienced a ritual from a different culture or faith community. What was uncomfortable, or surprising, or meaningful about that experience?

In a *New York Times* article, David Brooks writes: “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 solidify spiritual experiences.” While joy is not necessarily a prominent emotion named in the story Dave read, we might imagine that Mary and Joseph are held up by the community that surrounds them as they dedicate their child. In this ritual act, they are connected to their ancestors. Through the words of the prophets Simeon and Anna, they are also connected to those in the future. As they internalize the fullness of Jesus’ calling, they are not alone. Consider all the ways rituals can connect us—to those in the past, present, and future, as well as to the community who bears witness to the ritual. What rituals foster deeper connection? What commitments can our community of faith make?

Imagine you are Mary in this story. How do you receive Simeon’s prophecy? How do you internalize his words that a sword will “pierce your innermost being”? Consider Luke 2:19 when Mary “ponders” the shepherds’ message in her heart. How do you think Mary summons the courage to mother the messiah? How do you summon the courage to live into difficult callings? I hope you all had meaningful Christmas celebrations and I hope that rituals and traditions you observed at home and that we’ve observed have grounded you in your faith. May the year ahead bring us more opportunities to solidify our commitment to the one who’s birth we celebrate.