

“The Ties That Bind”

“... a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

Several years ago, my Uncle Russell – one of my father’s younger brothers – sent me a large envelope that contained a history of the Laustsen family, beginning with his generation and going back to our family’s origins in Denmark. It is a remarkable document, especially as I went through the pages that took me back through generations of our family all the way back to 1340. While most of my ancestors were farmers (the family farm in Janderup is still in the family, under the care of my cousin Knud), there are also references to ancestors who were judges, town clerks, mill workers, landlords, and bailiffs. While their names and faces are unknown, these are the people with whom I am connected and who in various ways have made me the person I am today.

Tracing our family history has become increasingly popular in recent years. The television program *Finding Your Roots* explores the ancestry of dozens of influential people from diverse backgrounds, “taking millions of viewers deep into the past to reveal the connections that bind us all.” (www.pbs.org). A DNA sample sent to companies such as ancestry.com and 23 and Me can reveal many details of a person’s family origins and the stories of some of their ancestors. The unique theology of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has led to their establishment of Family Research Centers who services are offered to all persons interested in exploring their family roots and the ties that bind them to ancestors across many generations.

His promises are fulfilled in successive generations. In the covenant with Abraham, God promises the patriarch that *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”* (Genesis 12:2-3). Beginning with the birth of Isaac and continuing through the twelve sons of Jacob, the genealogies of the Old Testament bear witness to how this promise is fulfilled as an extended family becomes a nation from which will be born *“one who is to rule Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.”* (Micah 5:2). The importance of genealogies as evidence of the fulfillment of the covenant promises of God extends into the New Testament, where the Gospel of Matthew begins with a genealogy that begins with Abraham and extends through David to *“Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”* (Matthew 1:16). The family history of God’s people is a story of God’s faithfulness in fulfilling God’s covenant promises to his people across the generations, and how these ancestors of faith continue to shape our lives as God’s people in this generation.

Today’s Gospel lesson is one of the stories from our family history that reminds us of our roots in the Jewish faith, of how our Lord Jesus Christ was raised in an observant Jewish household and how the traditions of Judaism shaped his story as well as the story of all generations of his followers. Forty days after his birth, Mary and Joseph bring their firstborn male child to Jerusalem to perform two acts that are required by the Torah: the redemption of the firstborn and the purification of the mother: *“When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord”* (Luke 2:22):

- “The LORD said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine ... Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem.” – Exodus 13: 1-2, 13.
- “If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean for seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean ... When her days of purification are completed, whether for a son or a daughter, 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 turtle-dove for a sin-offering. He shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood.” – Leviticus 12:2, 6-7.

Luke’s account of the presentation of Jesus in the Temple underscores the fulfillment of all that the Law required at the birth of a child.

Within the story of Jesus’ presentation in the temple are two testimonies as to the identity of the child of Mary and Joseph, presented by two of our ancestors in faith whose testimony is a piece of the foundation upon which our testimony is built. The first person introduced by Luke is Simeon, a man who is described as *“righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.”* (2:25). Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, Simeon exemplifies a devout response to God’s promise and God’s response to human devotion, which would be accomplished through the “consolation of Israel,” the restoration of the people and the fulfillment of God’s redemptive work:

- “For the LORD will comfort Zion; he will comfort all her waste places, and will make her wilderness like Eden, her desert like the garden of the LORD; joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of song ... Break forth into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.” – Isaiah 51:3, 52:9.

Simeon’s faithfulness is exemplified in his trust in the revelation of the Holy Spirit that *“he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.”* (2:26), a trust that personifies that words of the psalmist that *“those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever.”* (Psalm 125:1). Simeon’s trust in God’s promises is fulfilled on the day when, guided by the Spirit, he comes to the temple on the same day as the Holy Family; when he lays eyes on the child, he knows that his waiting has ended and the promise has come to fruition. *“The birth of a child, the fulfillment of God’s promises, the consolation of Israel, and the coming of the Messiah are all occasions for praising God.”* (Alan Culpepper). Taking the child in his arms, Simeon sings a hymn of praise for what God has accomplished for him and for all people:

- “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.” – 2:29-32.

Like other canticles in Luke, including the Song of Mary (*Magnificat*, 1:46-55) and the Song of Zechariah (*Benedictus*, 1:68-79), the *Nunc Dimittis* (named after the first two words in the Latin translation) is an inspired speech, declaring praise of God for God’s faithfulness and the redemption of the people, the assurance that a patriarch can die in peace because he has seen the fulfillment of God’s promises as God had assured Abraham that *“as for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.”* (Genesis 15:15). Simeon recognizes that he has been released from his mission to

watch for the coming of the Messiah because he has now seen the coming of the one who will bring salvation for all peoples, both Gentiles and Israelites.

- “Simeon’s blessing, therefore, again relates the birth of Jesus to the fulfillment of the promise of salvation found in the Scriptures of Israel, especially in Isaiah, and looks ahead to the inclusion of Gentiles as well as Jews in the experience of God’s blessings.” – Culpepper.

Understandably, *“the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.”* (2:33); amazement often follows an oracle or divine saying in Luke (*“All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.”* – 4:22). Simeon’s next act is to bless both parents, following the pattern of the dedication of Samuel at which both of the prophet’s parents are blessed (*“The Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, ‘May the LORD repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she has made to the LORD’; and then they would return to their home.”* – 1 Samuel 2:20). As Hannah dominated the story of the birth and blessing of her son Samuel, in Luke’s account the second oracle spoken by Simeon is directed to Mary, an oracle that foreshadows the rejection of 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.” – 2:34-35.

Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy of *“a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.”* (Isaiah 8:14); he is the one who will bring salvation but also judgment. Jesus will be *“a sign that will be opposed,”* the Son of Man who would be a sign of judgment for that generation (*“For just as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so the Son of Man will be to this generation.”* – 11:30). Simeon concludes his oracle with a warning to Mary that *“a sword will pierce your own soul too”*; Mary will share in the pain of the rejection of Jesus and the division of Israel.

- “Simeon proclaims that a discriminating judgment will come upon Israel and that it will touch Mary too, as an individual Israelite ... The physical fact of motherhood gave her no special status according to the values Jesus preached. If she is remembered as a mother in the Christian community, it is not only because her womb bore Jesus and her breasts nourished him (11:27); rather it is because she believed the Lord’s word in a way that gave her a preeminent membership in his true family of disciples.” – Raymond Brown.

Another person is present that day at the Temple as Jesus is presented in accordance with the Torah: *“There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher.”* (2:36). As a prophet, Anna continues the tradition of female prophets in the Old Testament (Miriam, Deborah, and Huldah) and anticipates the role of female prophets in the early church (*“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy ...”* – Acts 2:17). Anna’s character and piety are emphasized, but not her words; her blessing is characterized by praising God and speaking about the child; at the conclusion of her vigil in which *“she never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day ... she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”* (2:37-38).

- “Simeon and Anna, who represented the pious ones, declare that Jesus is the one who will bring salvation for Israel, but not all would receive the salvation. Jesus himself would be rejected and

many in Israel would reject the gospel, but it was also meant for ‘a light for revelation to the Gentiles.’” – Culpepper.

Simeon and Anna disappear from the Gospel story, never to be heard from again; but the witness of these ancestors of faith remains an important part of our shared history as the family of God, the manner in which we respond to God’s promises and rejoice in the Lord’s presence. Simeon and Anna trust in God’s promises, no matter how long the time of waiting may be before these promises are fulfilled. They were living examples of faith which is *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* (Hebrews 11:1).

- “These two aged saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God’s promises ... God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God’s keeping an old promise.” – Fred Craddock.

I never met most of the people in my Uncle Russell’s family history, but I know that each of them played an important role in making me the person I am today – not only in the genetic DNA that I inherited, but in the faith that was passed on from generation to generation. Each of these ancestors were faithful to God’s call to baptize and teach their children so that they may learn to trust and serve God. Each generation served as role models to the next generation in how to live as a child of God, how to use each day as a time to make a difference in Jesus’ name. When my grandparents inherited this faith, they passed it on to my father and his siblings, and he in turn passed on the love of God in Jesus Christ to me so that I might have that faith of my ancestors so that, living in the faith of our fathers and mothers, I might *“proclaim thee too, as love knows how, by saving word and faithful life.”* (“Faith of Our Fathers,” ELW Hymn 812).

- “It all depends on this, that we with the dear old Simeon open our eyes and see the babe, take him into our arms, and kiss him, which means that he is our hope, joy, comfort, and life. Where this faith is firm and sure in our hearts – that this child is God’s Savior – there, indeed, it must follow that the heart is content and is not afraid of sin or death, for it has a Savior who delivers it from it.” – Martin Luther, 1544.

The ties that bind me to my ancestors define who I am as a member of the Laustsen family; and the ties that bind us to our ancestors in faith like Simeon and Anna define who we are as members of the family of God, the church which is the body of Christ. We share the DNA of faith that trusts in God’s promises, which knows that in Jesus God has fulfilled all that was promised to God people through the prophets, and that the good news of Jesus Christ is a light for all people, for it is God’s will that all would be incorporated into this family of faith that from generation to generation proclaims the love of God that binds us together with cords that cannot be broken.

Amen.