

And a Little Child Shall Lead Them  
Galatians 4:4-7 and Luke 2:22-40  
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All too soon, children grow up. Before we know it, they have gone from crawling to walking, from sounding out their first words to writing their final exams, from the fear of contracting cooties from the opposite sex to the pursuit of them. Childhood, it seems, is over in the blink of an eye. The same seems true of the childhood of Jesus. It lasts this week, and then is gone again, as his adulthood and mission begin in earnest in the story of his baptism just next Sunday. It is true there is not much written about the young Jesus, but even if there were, I fear we would just rush right past it anyway, and move right on to the rest. So impatient we are. But for today, we remain with the baby Jesus and Luke's story of his dedication in the temple, his impact on the aged Simeon and the widowed Anna, and the blessed truth that "the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of the Lord was upon him."

Before he had grown very much, however, Jesus was certainly handled quite a bit, handed around as young children often are, everyone wanting to get a little piece of the new entrance into the world and their lives. Surely his family got their turn, and maybe some friends, but there was also this stranger, this funny old guy in the temple, Simeon, who took his turn lifting the child from his mother's arms and holding him up high, maybe even twirling him around as much as his ancient

legs would allow. I suppose Simeon was as bold as he was, snatching the young Jesus from his family just like that, because he had nothing left to lose. He'd seen children come and children go, and none of them were the Lord's anointed, none of them had reached into his heart the way Jesus did. He'd seen them brought to be dedicated in the Temple, perhaps by the thousands, and never before had he seen, perceived, discerned, something divine in a child until this one. Precious, all of them, but none so divine. And so, it would have been worth the horrified faces of the parents or a slap across the face, or even his eviction from the Temple to be able to lay the eyes of his heart on the one "destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel." Because that's what he'd been waiting for, because that's what the world had been waiting for, even if they never really knew it.

It is so, so easy to romanticize Jesus and his infancy, with that great story that has everything you need for great art, drama and cinema. It is so easy in part because of our own experiences with children, and what they bring out in most of us, feelings of tenderness and protection, hope and possibility, not to mention being overwhelmed by their utter cuteness. And because infants don't have much to say for themselves, we tend to say it for them – we often project onto them what is going on inside of us. We feel about them what we are feeling about ourselves and others and the world. Remember that the next time someone around you says the baby must have gas. Sure, they each have unique personalities, but as we hold them in our arms, there is just a sweet face, and what we want that face to be

expressing, and what we want that face to be in our own eyes, even if we tell ourselves we want the child to be only and ever what God wants him or her to be. We say to young children, “It’s OK to be a garbage collector, as long as you’re happy,” but few of us really mean it. What we too often want them to be is exactly that: what *we* want them to be. And maybe that’s OK if we can really and truly, without crossing our fingers behind our back say, “I want you to know that you are a child of God,” and mean only that.

But Simeon, blessed Simeon, was very likely no romantic about children. He probably didn’t project too much of himself on the children he witnessed in the Temple. If he had, probably more than one of the children who passed before his eyes in those many years of waiting would have been “the one.” Rather, and here is what is really, really important, what Luke seems to be saying is that Simeon was projecting not himself, but God, onto those children, until the one came along that really was God and made it possible to see that image come to life. Yes, it may be a stretch to say that Simeon sought out in every child he saw the image of God imprinted on each one of them, although it’s possible. But it does seem safe to say that he perceived the image of God when Jesus came through that day. Armed with the promise that “he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah,” he trusted the maker of that promise each day until it came to pass. You see, If Simeon had been projecting his own hopes and fears, doubts and possibilities, he never would have recognized Jesus, for it all would have been too small. How

many of his own people could see that Jesus was meant for all, and not only the Jews? How many could have seen that the coming of the Messiah would mean the falling of their own people, rather than just their rising? No, that was God's vision for the Messiah, not Simeon's, but Simeon played along, and got to be the first to recognize what many would eventually see, "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Yes, it is easy to romanticize the baby Jesus and miss out on what Simeon saw in even an infant. It is easy to spend our time with babies and project onto them ourselves and all of our desires. But wouldn't the world be a better place if we did as Simeon did, by projecting God, rather than ourselves, on the children in our lives, and the children of the world. It may not be that we'd see the Lord's Messiah, but we might see them each as worthy of love and respect and cherishing. We might be convicted to put an end to child labor, and child soldiers and child prostitutes. We might stop expecting children to be reflections of our own images or somehow little extensions of ourselves, but instead give them the opportunity to teach us, and make us better, to lead us. Indeed, I should hope we would aspire for our children to exceed even our own righteousness, and not simply reflect it.

I want to tell you a story of another child, this one not an infant, but one cherished nonetheless. Years ago, there was a very wealthy man who, with his devoted young son, shared a passion for art collecting. Together they traveled around the world, adding only the finest art treasures to their collection. Priceless

works by Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet and many others adorned the walls of the family estate. The widowed elder man looked on with satisfaction, as his only child became an experienced art collector. The son's trained eye and sharp business mind caused his father to beam with pride as they dealt with art collectors around the world.

As winter approached, war engulfed the nation, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram. His beloved son was missing in action. The art collector anxiously awaited more news, fearing he would never see his son again. Within days, his fears were confirmed. The young man had died while rushing a fellow soldier to a medic.

Distraught and lonely, the old man faced an upcoming life filled with anguish and sadness. The twilight of his life, a season that he had looked forward to spending with his beloved son, would move toward greater and greater darkness without the light of his life. But one day in that season of despair, a knock on the door awakened the depressed old man. As he walked to the door, the masterpieces of art on the walls only reminded him that his son was not coming home. As he opened the door, he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hand. He introduced himself to the man by saying, "I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you."

As the two began to talk, the soldier told of how the man's son had told everyone of his father's love of fine art. And as they finished, the soldier said, "I'm an artist and I want to give you this." As the old man unwrapped the package, the paper gave way to reveal a portrait of the man's son. Though the world would never consider it the work of a genius, the painting featured the young man's face in striking detail. Overcome with emotion, the man thanked the soldier, promising to hang the picture above the fireplace. A few hours later, after the soldier had departed, the old man set about his task. True to his word, the painting went above the fireplace, pushing aside millions of dollars of other famous paintings. Then the man sat in his chair and spent his whole afternoon gazing at the wondrous gift he had been given.

During the days and weeks that followed, the man realized that even though his son was no longer with him, the boy's life would live on because of those he had touched. He would soon learn that his son had rescued dozens of wounded soldiers before a bullet stilled his caring heart. As the stories of his son's gallantry continued to reach him, fatherly pride and satisfaction began to ease the grief. The painting of his son soon became his most prized possession, far eclipsing any interest in the pieces for which museums around the world clamored. He told his neighbors it was the greatest gift he had ever received.

The following spring, the old man became ill and passed away. The art world was in anticipation. You see, with the collector's passing, and his only son

dead, those paintings would be sold at an auction. Well, the day soon arrived and art collectors from around the world gathered at the family's home to bid on some of the world's most spectacular paintings. Dreams would be fulfilled this day; greatness would be achieved as many would claim, "I have the greatest collection."

The auction began with a painting that was not on any museum's list. It was the painting of the man's son. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid. The room was silent. "Who will open the bidding with \$100?" he asked. Minutes passed. No one spoke. From the back of the room came, "Who cares about that painting? It's just a picture of his son. Let's forget it and go on to the good stuff."

More voices echoed in agreement. "No, we have to sell this one first," replied the auctioneer. "Now, who will take the son?" Finally, the gardener of the old man spoke. "Will you take ten dollars for the painting? That's all I have. I knew the boy, so I'd like to have it."

"I have ten dollars. Will anyone go higher?" called the auctioneer. After more silence, the auctioneer said, "Going once, going twice. Gone." The gavel fell.

Cheers filled the room and someone exclaimed, "Now we can get on with it and we can bid on these treasures!" The auctioneer looked at the audience and announced the auction was over.

Stunned disbelief quieted the room. Someone spoke up and asked, "What do you mean it's over? We didn't come here for a picture of some old guy's son. What about all of these paintings? There are millions of dollars of art here! I demand that

you explain what's going on here!” The auctioneer replied, “It’s very simple. When I was called to conduct this auction, I was told of a secret stipulation in the will... I was not allowed to reveal that stipulation until this time. Only the painting of the son would be auctioned. Whoever bought that painting would inherit the entire estate, including the paintings. According to the father’s will, whoever takes the Son . . . gets it all!”

And they all went away sad, except for the one whose eyes were open enough to see what Simeon saw: a child whose life reflected not just his father’s interests, but the very image of God. All the rest at the auction that day saw some father’s son as an impediment to their future rather than the key to unlock it. May we begin and end this New Year seeing the image of God in every child, and remember to treat them with the greatest of love, and like the prophetess Anna give thanks for them, for their future is in our hands, and ours in theirs. Amen.