

## Adapting to Improv

### Luke 2:22-40

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There's a friend of mine who is a jazz musician, a saxophonist. I try not to hold it against him, and he tries not to razz me for how wildly incomprehensible I find jazz. I don't hate all of it; I love some slow Coltrane or Chet Baker on a rainy day, and there's a definite delight in having a kitchen dance party to bebop, ragtime, Indo jazz, and big band Ellington numbers. But I get lost completely when it comes to my friend's deep love for free and modal jazz styles, for the seemingly boundless lawlessness of experimentation. At one of his concerts, one of his fellow musicians took the top off her piano to play the strings directly.

I could feel the spirit of my organist grandmother shrieking. Did this woman not know that there are *rules*? How can anyone like music that just does whatever it wants?

“When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.” I'm very pleased that Luke opens with this idea that there are expectations, but of course, expectations don't always mean happenings.

Merry Christmas, Church! It is, in fact, still Christmas, and will be through the first week of January, because Christmas is a season rather than a day. (Hence the “Twelve Days of Christmas” song, which I also wish to avoid listening to in a concert.) Christ is born and we get twelve whole days to consider what that means and how it changed the world, how it changes us, as well as taking a moment to look at the rare tales we get of Jesus before adulthood. Remember, we spent Advent talking about how the gospels are telling certain stories for certain reasons; Luke is writing to get the world to accept this Man called Jesus as someone extraordinary, holy.

Stephen Hultgren of Australian Lutheran College writes, “The scarcity of information about Jesus' childhood reminds us that the gospels are not biographies, or at least not primarily that. They are kerygmatic narratives—they seek to proclaim the gospel and to undergird and strengthen faith in Christ. The little information that they give us about Jesus' childhood is not intended, say, to explain the development of his character or personality. It is clear that Luke's childhood stories seek to make theological points: Jesus was born a Jew among Jews. He came under the law of Moses. And, although he fulfilled the law in honoring his father and mother (Luke 2:51), his ultimate obedience was to his heavenly Father (Luke 2:49; cf. Mark 3:35).”<sup>1</sup> There are rules and expectations; you don't take the top off the piano. Christ is born, the magi are still on their way, and Mary and Joseph take their son to the temple, as is the law.

“In accordance with the Law of Moses,” Luke writes, reassuring his readers that Jesus had all the correct trappings of entering the world, understood what the classical key change was doing. But right away, something is a little different, a blue note in the chord progression—Simeon approaches. Luke tells us Simeon was “righteous and devout,” a man promised to see the salvation of Israel, and he goes into the Temple to find...a baby.

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<sup>1</sup> [Commentary on Luke 2:22-40 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2014

It is hard to overstate how incredibly weird it was to have the enfleshed God show up as an infant. We're used to it, we 21<sup>st</sup> century celebrants, what with our thousands of years of cherubic art and our plethora of manger scenes, but Simeon and his contemporaries were likely looking for a warrior. Zechariah 9 talks about a coming king, Daniel 7 speaks of the Son of Man who holds sway over all things, Isaiah 53 writes of a wise and righteous governor. The Messiah was supposed to gather God's chosen together and shake off the yoke of imperial rule, ushering in an era of God's peace.<sup>2</sup> A baby couldn't do any of that, or at least wouldn't be able to for several decades.

On top of that, this was a *poor* baby. Professor Shively Smith writes, "Luke makes clear *where* in Jewish society Jesus' observant family exists. It is among the poor. The two turtledoves Jesus' family presents are the sacrifices designated for the poor, according to the Levitical code (Leviticus 5:7, 12:8, 14:22)...In Luke 2...the issue of poverty and the gospel is much more than simply a "cause" Jesus champions. The location and experiences of the poor, is the experience of Jesus from his infancy. From Luke's perspective, when Jesus talks about the poor, he is talking about himself."<sup>3</sup>

Luke says three times in this passage that Mary and Joseph were following the Law in what they were doing. There is narrative emphasis that they had planned everything to be as classical and expected as they could.

And that's the thing; my friend the jazz musician told me once when I was complaining about how lawless it is that jazz is actually nothing but laws transmuted into new configurations. Jazz—good jazz—takes incredible knowledge and skill to be done well, to be music rather than misused saxophones; it's precisely because jazz musicians know what the rules are that they know how to put them in different patterns and produce something entirely new. Jesus from birth to death to resurrection is surrounded by the rules of His day and knows them inside and out; in Matthew 5, Jesus promises His disciples, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."<sup>4</sup>

So Simeon, expecting Beethoven from this clearly law-abiding family, gets Thelonious Monk and bless him, he rolls with it, because this, too, is beautiful music. Simeon adapts, knowing that the Spirit is at work here even though it's absolutely mind-bending that the one to save would be the one who could, at this point, be so easily crushed; the one to hold power was the one who economically and socially had none; the one called Christ couldn't even talk yet.

Luke continues his love for music in placing a song in Simeon's mouth: "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, / because my eyes have seen your salvation. / You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. / It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles / and a glory for your people Israel." The inclusion of Gentiles in this most Jewish of spaces promises that poverty and infancy are not the only ways that God is riffing a new jazz solo; this child is for the world, *all* of it, meant to bring change as well as glory, new pathways branching off the familiar.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. [What Is the Jewish Belief About Moshiach \(Messiah\)? - Chabad.org](#), although this focuses more on a modern view rather than that of first century Jews

<sup>3</sup> [Commentary on Luke 2:22-40 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) 2017

<sup>4</sup> Mt. 5:17, NRSVUE

Right on Simeon's heels comes the prophetess Anna, not only giving narrative space to a woman as well as a man but also mirroring the pair of Zechariah and Mary and their reactions to the promise of Jesus. Both Anna and Simeon are mentioned as being "very old," holding not only the sway of the respect of one's elders but also showing that those who keep the memory of the nation see in this child the promise for which they have been waiting, longing, hoping. Both celebrate this child and the promise He represents, and the family finishes their law-abiding offerings and goes home, and "the child grew up and became strong."

And nothing happens.

Yet.

It is the season of Christmas, and we have been telling the story of this birth for thousands of years, singing about peace on earth and good will to all, and it is the last day of 2023 and there is war in Gaza and Ukraine and there are enough anti-trans bills in the US to ensure that good will is a limited commodity, to say nothing of the anti-immigration threads or the cultural misogyny or the racism bleeding across our global conversations. It is the last day of 2023 and The United Methodist Church is gearing up to showcase our worst and most frightened selves on an international stage; the American political system is lumbering into gear for yet another bloodbath of ideology and hate. It is the season of Christmas and we stand on the threshold of a new year dancing the waltz of today's date and perhaps we wonder whether the jazz solo of a Jesus held by a man named Simeon and celebrated by a woman named Anna is ever going to change anything at all.

In one of the journals of John Wesley, he records part of a conversation with his friend Peter Bohler when Wesley was having a rough day about his belief in God and salvation and the whole bit. Wesley was considering leaving preaching because he was so full of doubt, and he writes that Bohler told him, "Preach faith till you have it; and then, because you have it, you will preach faith."<sup>5</sup>

"The child grew up and became strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on him." Two chapters from now, Jesus will stand in front of His hometown synagogue and proclaim Isaiah's promise of "good news to the poor," "release to the prisoners," liberation of the oppressed.<sup>6</sup> Ten chapters from now there will be disciples who are changed because they have met this Man Jesus. A whole book from now there will be this thing called Church, which is messy and desperate and weird and filled with people who love. The story continues; 2024 looms in uncertainty and hope, and the story continues; 2023 closes in a maelstrom of joy and sorrow and anger and celebration, and the story continues. Simeon's song may not have been jazz, but the God Who was born and is alive dances beside us no matter what comes next, promising that we never face the music alone.

How shall we sing in the new year, Church? How shall our carols of peace and glad tidings become our faith-filled sermons of liberation and good news? What shall we become, we who gather to honor this unexpected child, when we lean into the assurance that Christ is here, now, always, inviting us to melodies we never thought could be so beautiful?

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<sup>5</sup> [John Wesley: Journal of John Wesley - Christian Classics Ethereal Library \(ccel.org\)](https://www.ccel.org/jw/journal/)

<sup>6</sup> Luke 4:18.

May we have peace; may we have compassion; may we have courage; may we have love;  
may we have music, all the year long. Amen.