

Monday, December 26 – Read Luke 2:21-24. Jesus' parents were devout Hebrews. They carefully obeyed Moses' laws with their firstborn son. Exodus 13:2 reads, "Consecrate to me every firstborn male," so they did. We get a sign of the parents' poverty in this story. Leviticus 12:8 said the reason for offering "a pair of doves or two young pigeons" was "if she cannot afford a lamb." Evidently they couldn't. Jesus, like other Hebrew boys, was circumcised eight days after birth. It was a sign he was one of God's people. That model is one big reason Covenant and the United Methodist Church baptizes infants. At what age were you baptized? What does it mean to you that you belong to God? God sent Gabriel directly to Mary and Joseph with divine messages. He said their son was God's promised Savior. Yet they came to the Temple like ordinary worshippers to offer their sacrifice. Are there any traditions or tasks at your church that you're tempted to feel "above" or "beyond"? How can our individualistic culture blind us to the value of being part of the history of God at work in the family of faith?

Tuesday, December 27 – Read Luke 2:25-35. Joseph and Mary would have been strangers to most everyone in the city of Jerusalem. So it must have been unexpected, perhaps even a bit alarming, when elderly Simeon approached them. But in the busy Temple court, where others saw only a poor couple with a baby, Simeon recognized their child. He pronounced blessings on them, and on the baby. Simeon's words of praise echoed the language of the prophet Isaiah. Both Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6 spoke of "the servant of the Lord" being a light to the Gentiles. How might Simeon's immersion in the Scriptures have prepared him to see in Jesus more than a common baby? How does the Bible help you see below the surface of life? Simeon said of Jesus, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against." To Mary he added the haunting words, "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." How did he know that? What do you think Luke meant when he said of Simeon that "the Holy Spirit was on him"?

Wednesday, December 28 – Read Luke 2:36-38. Our culture tends to put a premium on youth. Mary and Joseph's world, however, saw age as a positive quality (remember, average life expectancies at that time were 40 years or less). So Anna was not brushed off as an elderly eccentric. She was taken seriously when she praised God and spoke to those around her about Mary and Joseph's child. Anna came up to Joseph and Mary "at that very moment"—joining Simeon. How deftly God timed the arrival of these two aged seers to uplift Jesus' parents! Has an "at that very moment" experience helped you trust in God's care? How can trust in God's timing help you hold on when you're waiting for something you need or want very much? Luke called Anna a prophet. In the Bible, "prophet" meant, not so much one who tells the future as a person who sees present spiritual realities clearly and speaks for God. How could knowing that a prophet like Anna had recognized Jesus fortify Joseph and Mary for the tasks they faced? When has a discerning person been God's voice to you?

Thursday, December 29 – Read John 9:13-34. How did Simeon and Anna's inner vision become so keen that they promptly recognized God's presence in the baby Jesus? John told a story about spiritual sight and blindness. Passing a man born blind, Jesus restored his sight. Jesus' smugly religious foes, however, were blinded by their assumptions. They could not "see" even the plain facts of what he had done. John Newton used words from verse 25 of this story in his musical testimony, the hymn Amazing Grace. "I once was lost," He wrote, "but now am found; was blind, but now I see." In what ways has Jesus' amazing grace made your spiritual sight clearer? In what areas do you want to ask God for greater clarity in your inner vision? In verse 24, the leaders told the healed blind man, "Give glory to God by telling the truth. We know this man is a sinner." They sounded like the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland, shouting, "Verdict first—evidence later." How does enduring faith in God differ from obstinate, blinding trust in your own opinions (even religious ones)?

Friday, December 30 – Read John 9:35-41. John deftly wove layers of meaning into the story of Jesus and the blind man. When Jesus told the healed man that he was looking at the Messiah, he “saw” Jesus spiritually as well as physically, and worshiped him. Jesus’ foes insisted their spiritual sight was clear. But they were so eager to deny Jesus’ power they couldn’t even admit obvious physical facts! Jesus said, “Since you claim to see, you are morally accountable for your choices about me.” The end of the year is a good time to pause and take stock. How is your relationship with Jesus? Are you more deeply aware of, and responsive to, his infinite love for you, or has anything weakened your connection? Ask God to give you clear vision about where you are, and to guide you to a deeper commitment to your Savior. How often in your day-to-day routine are you aware of God’s love for you, and of God’s presence with you?