

**The Blessing of Strangers**  
**The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC**  
**Rev. Jennifer Gingras**  
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*Luke 2:21-38*

Sometimes we are sent out on the road because Roman authorities demand a census, as we heard about on Christmas Eve. In today's story, the Holy Family is once again on a road trip, this time headed to Jerusalem to present the baby in the Temple, as required by the law of Moses.

This trip to Jerusalem is, at least, on the way home from Bethlehem to Nazareth, which would have been a ninety-mile journey over difficult terrain – only this time with a newborn! The Holy Family is far from home, in an unfamiliar place, at a time when they would certainly like to be home, sleeping in their own bed, surrounded by the familiar, the comfortable, the creature comforts of home.

And I'm sure there were many things they could have done that day other than go to church! We could understand if they woke up that morning and thought, *"can't we just read the paper over brunch and stay in our pajamas?"*

Sometimes we are dislocated from our warm and cozy places for bad reasons (like those evil Romans made us!) Sometimes we are dislocated and uncomfortable and pushed out of bed for good reasons, because we are following God's call on our lives. And what could be better than presenting a new baby in the Temple?

My second child was effectively raised in the temple.

Not my first, though! I was too nervous about germs and strangers to risk it with her. And what if she made noise? I would die of embarrassment. Better to wait until she was ready to go to Sunday School and could behave like a person!

But from the time my second child was a week old, he was at church, being passed around and loved by more people than I could keep track of. More than once, someone would ask me where my baby was, and I would just gesture toward the fellowship hall or sanctuary. *"I'm sure someone has him."*

It seems that as a new mother the second time around, my worries about germs and flu season were quickly over ridden by the relief of being part of a community who could help me. So I learned to treasure the times that other people took my baby from me, and take advantage of the break they provided. Because cute new babies are really exhausting, and they can never be loved or held enough.

I am forever grateful for the knowledge that my children were loved and held and cherished by so many people. The hardest part of leaving my former church was the realization that my daughter and son might not remember all of those dear people by name, those who had loved them, and cared for them, and taught them sweet Bible stories, and celebrated them. But all these years I've come to understand that no matter their age, there will be adults they will encounter at church that will show them the love of God.

But I wonder what brand-new-mother-of-God-Mary thought when she walked into the Jerusalem Temple and encountered Simeon. There was that moment when Simeon took Jesus in his arms. Think about that. Yanked baby Jesus right out of his mama's arms! I bet a lot of us here today would freak out if some strange old guy just ran up and grabbed your infant. And rightly so. But Mary seems to have rolled with it.

Of course, strange things had been happening ever since the angel told her she was about to be in a family way. Like those crusty old shepherds showing up the night Jesus was born to coo over him as he lay swaddled in a manger. Maybe after you've had shepherds show up in the labor and delivery room, you are unfazed by a priest grabbing your baby and singing.

Perhaps Mary was learning that if you're going to mother God's Child, you had better be resilient.

Simeon didn't know them. They weren't likely to see each other at church every week, once they went home to Nazareth and he stayed in the Temple in Jerusalem. But he blessed them anyway. And he spoke truth to them, truth that may or may not have been wanted.

I think of the blessings we have received from strangers over the years. When my son was about 2 months old, we went on our first road trip to see my parents. We were in a restaurant in a small town in southern Maine just off I-95, after driving about 5 straight hours because the baby slept when the car was moving. But we needed coffee, and a break, so we chanced it.

We had only glanced at the menus for a few minutes when an older woman from the kitchen came out to welcome us. She had heard him squawking from his infant seat we had balanced on the tabletop. "*Give me that baby*", she said.

We were so tired and drained that we dutifully handed him over to this stranger. The waitress took our order and walked around with our son the whole time we were eating, taking him into the kitchen to see the excitement there, then walking around to see the other diners. It was a blessing (or maybe a Christmas miracle) that Clark, Cady and I could eat our dinner in peace, all of us able to use both hands.

That waitress treated us like family. I like to think that's how Simeon and Anna treated the Holy Family on their journey when they blessed them in the Temple through their words and actions.

There are children, baptized in this church or in other churches (or not yet baptized), who will be here each week. Our role as church is to serve as Simeon and Anna for them, making sure they hear of God's love and bless their parents. A safe nursery, a noise tolerant congregation, a family friendly changing room, an open communion table, caring Sunday school teachers and volunteers, snacks after worship, there are so many ways we bless each other.

There are lots of different and good ways we make family, and community. The church gives us a community we don't get in other places. Sometimes we end up in churches with friends who invited us in the first place, people we would voluntarily choose to be with.

But more often than not there are people in our church families with whom we would never have met in our regular life. People who have had different experiences that we have, or who may follow different political ideologies than we do, or who have a personality that (frankly) sometimes rubs us the wrong way. And that's a good thing – because being around others you may not have chosen otherwise is an opportunity to stretch and grow in grace.

Something about this group of people that we call "church" creates a quirky family out of strangers. It is how we are blessed and how we bless others, encouraging and supporting each other on this sometimes-dislocating journey of life.

Like baby Jesus being welcomed and cooed over by Simeon in the Temple, we are blessed by strangers. We hear Anna speak good news over a cup of coffee at fellowship hour that we hadn't yet seen for ourselves, and we pause in thankfulness.

As we all enter into Sabbath rest today, on this first day of a new year full of possibilities, I pray that like Simeon and Anna, we too leave time for wonder and amazement. May we come to expect God to be at work in our midst, leading us into an intergenerational community rooted in faith that can be a true blessing. Amen.