



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF OUR LORD, FEBRUARY 2, 2020
MALACHI 3:1-4; PSALM 84; HEBREWS 2:14-18; LUKE 2:22-40

FEAST OF BLESSING

Luke 2:22-40 *[When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."]*

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "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."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "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."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.]

February 2nd is a special day, and it's not about the groundhog or the Super Bowl! It's the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple, one of the church's oldest holy

days, celebrated since the 4th century CE. When February 2nd falls on a Sunday, the readings we heard today replace the ones assigned for the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany.

Since this only happens every 5 or 6 years, it's a special day and worthy of savoring the details.

This day is rooted in the two rituals that bring Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to the temple forty days after his birth. It's called the Feast of the Presentation because Jewish law required that all first-born sons be presented in the temple and redeemed from priestly service through the offering of silver coins.

This day is also called Candlemas and the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary because religious law mandated that 40 days after the birth of a son, the mother must be purified by presenting two offerings – a lamb and a turtledove or a pigeon – to the priest. What Mary brings – two doves – is an exception for when a woman cannot afford a lamb. So, we are reminded again of the holy family's poverty.

Both these rituals were solemn and joyful occasions as they marked the blessings of a safe delivery for the mother and the gift of a newborn child. They were routine, too, in Jewish life, and there would have been multiple families in the temple every day meeting these obligations.

But this day is one of those days where strangers converge at the right place and right time and lives are completely changed. The Holy Spirit leads the aging Simeon – a wise and holy man – to the temple that morning, so that when Jesus' parents bring him in, Simeon recognizes God incarnate – the one

who comes to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, bringing light and truth and reconciliation. He takes Jesus in his arms, blesses the family, and warns Mary, "This child will be resisted, bringing the upheaval of Israel and revealing the truth of humanity. And you will suffer, too."

At that same moment, the prophet Anna appears. She is the only named female prophet in the New Testament, and her great age and piety give her particular authority. She, too, recognizes Jesus and rejoices that God's promise of healing and restoration has been realized.

Can you imagine how stunned Mary and Joseph might have been? How others in the temple going about their business might have stopped and stared, wondering what it all meant? We don't know the details of what happened next, though, only that after the family returned home to Nazareth, Jesus grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and was favored by God.

The story of the Presentation in the Temple is so foundational to our tradition that when the church developed a liturgy for women surviving childbirth, it focused not on purification but on the themes of blessing and thanksgiving. This liturgy continued for centuries in the Anglican tradition, becoming "The Churching of Women." It went like this.

About a month or so after the birth of a child, when the mother had recovered from the delivery, she came out of her seclusion at

home and returned to church. On that first Sunday, there was a rite that acknowledged the pain and peril of childbirth, with the mother giving thanks and praise to God for her safety and recovery. She would also make an offering of money that was often used to assist women in labor.

The liturgy concludes with a prayer that asks God to grant that “the child of this thy servant may daily increase in wisdom and stature and grow in thy love and service.” Do you hear the parallel to the description of Jesus’ childhood?

When our prayer book was revised in 1979, The Churching of Women evolved to become “Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child.” Today, when parents bring their new child to church for the first time, we pray together as a community, giving thanks for the child and for the gift of parenthood, and asking God’s blessing on the new manifestation of their family.

I tell you all of this church history not only because it’s interesting, but because this story of the presentation in the temple is not just a story of something that happened 2000 years ago in a far-away place. It’s our story, too.

Twenty-five years ago, our first child, our son, John was born in New York City. We lived at 80th and Broadway, across the street from Zabar’s, a landmark Jewish deli, bakery, coffee roaster and housewares emporium. It took up an entire city block, and when you walked in the door,

the smell of freshly baked bread, tangy cheeses, and roasting coffee would wash over you.

The crowd was usually six-deep in front of the fish and meat counters, and you’d have to wait patiently while each customer was advised on the merits of smoked sablefish vs. Scotch salmon or how their brisket should be sliced. I learned to cook – and to eat – from countless trips to Zabar’s.

When our son was 10 days old, my husband Will had to travel for work, and I was alone with the baby for several days. I was still figuring out how to be a mother and felt more than a little overwhelmed. That time was a sleepless blur, but I do remember the feeling of panic one middle of the night when I could not ease John’s crying.

The next morning, I called the pediatrician in tears to say that something must be wrong; please tell me what to do. She asked if I had been outside the apartment yet, and when the answer was no, she instructed me to swaddle the baby, put him in the carrier on my chest and go for a walk. So I did, stuffing blankets all around him since he was so tiny.

I found myself walking carefully down Broadway, noticing all the potential dangers of a city street. I went into Zabar’s and stood in the middle of the store, just breathing the familiar deliciousness. And then it happened.

A little old, old lady whom I’d seen before at the fish counter stopped in front of me and peeked at the baby. “Oh, look at him! He’s

just a minute old – still with one foot in heaven!” She said in a vaguely eastern European accent. And then another grandma stopped – also a regular and no more than five feet tall – saying, “What a blessing! What a beautiful baby!” And then a third joined them, exclaiming, “Bless him, and bless you, his mother! Bless his father and bless his grandparents!”

The three stood there beaming at me, wanting to know everything about the baby and how I was doing as a new mother. They offered their blessings several more times and then went on their way. Later I learned that two of them were survivors of the Holocaust. They were angels. Right there in the cheese aisle.

When I left the store, I was no longer anxious or worried. I was filled with gratitude – for them and for all the guides and encouragers in life. Strangers who converge in the right place at the right time and give us what we need to notice the Holy Spirit at work in our lives.

My first-born son was presented to God in Zabar’s.

When we welcome a new child into this community, when we bless them in their parents’ arms, as happens at baptisms and Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child, even if we don’t know them personally, we share in that deep awe and wonder at the mystery of new life. When that happens in the future, I invite you to remember the Feast of the Presentation.

Because on that day – and every day – you wear the mantle of Anna and Simeon, guided by the Holy Spirit, showing up at the right time and in the right place to praise God and offer blessing. You carry on the tradition of the three elderly Jewish ladies at Zabar’s.

We are all meant to be holy messengers of God’s blessing. And so, we pray:

Gracious God, source of all life: we give you thanks for all your children. Inspire us to stop, pay attention, and bless their lives. And grant, dear Lord, that they may daily increase in wisdom and stature, and grow in your love and service. Amen.



SAINT MARK'S
EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL