



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

Calvary Episcopal Church
Presentation of Jesus in the Temple
February 2, 2020

In the name of God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Your eyes are not playing tricks on you. Scott has not suddenly aged twenty years. Sadly he is at home sick with some version of whatever is going around, and I am filling in for him. I know you join me in wishing him well.

Getting a call late on Saturday afternoon to preach, I was relieved to remember that today we celebrate the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. It is a sweet story and one I need to hear. Though I don't know about you, I expect you, as I do, feel the need of a story of hope and optimism, of promise and completion. The world feels a bit whacky to me right now; the level of public rancor and disunity is profoundly disturbing. So to hear a story of something so basic and lovely as a young couple arriving at the Temple with their new baby boy to offer him to God is heartwarming. One thing we clearly know about Mary and Joseph is that they were good Jews, serious in the practice of their faith. They said their prayers, their told and retold the stories of old, and they aimed to do right by their young boy. Though poor as church mice—or Temple mice in this case, they came, as Hebraic law required, with their newborn boy, just 40 days old, to offer him to God. With no particular prescience about the future of their remarkable baby but with love and hope and not much else, they loaded him up and came to the Temple. Forty-day old babies are pretty cute, just tracking with their eyes and smiling a bit. It is a time when parents begin to imagine how advanced their little bundle of joy is—“oh, did you see how he did that”—identifying all sorts of precocious skills, usually visible only to them. Surely Mary and Joseph were no different; and almost certainly, Jesus, being Jesus, was particularly adorable and brilliant!

Though this enraptured couple did not have the five-shekels needed to purchase a lamb to be sacrificed, the Temple had a provision for poor people like them: a pair of turtledoves—no partridge in a pear tree as far as we know but a pair of turtledoves—would do just fine. By this simple, ancient ritual Mary and Joseph did their best to put their young son on the road to holiness. In this vignette there are two other marvelous characters, Simeon and Anna. In some ways for me, the story belongs to them.

Simeon, a righteous and devout man, gave his life to praying for the consolation of Israel. What had led to his becoming so devoted? Some tragedy in his life? What made him as he was? What we know is that for some time he had spent his life praying for the coming of the Messiah, Israel's ultimate salvation, its final consolation. In his devotion, Simeon heard the Holy Spirit promise him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah; and at long last the waiting had come to an end. This precious child, now cradled in his arms, the first child of an impoverished, pretty ordinary looking couple from Nazareth, was indeed, he believed, the Messiah; and at that moment Simeon's life was complete. His famous words, immortalized in Elizabethan language:

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace according to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the glory of thy people
Israel.

In some ways Anna was an even more remarkable figure. Not coming and going from the Temple, she never left it, so intent was she upon her life apart. Widowed at a very young age after only seven years of marriage, she gave all her life to the Temple. From the tribe of Asher, one of the 12 tribes, Anna for reasons about which we can only speculate chose not to remarry but to repair to the temple, where she would spend the rest of her life fasting and praying. A prophetess, when she heard the words of Simeon, she too knew the truth and began to praise God for the coming of this child. My sense of her is that she reveled in the shadows of the church, demanding almost nothing, always quietly and persistently going about her search for God.

I said in the beginning that it is a sweet story; and I believe it is. I am sap for babies, always have been; and at the other end of life, I am heartened to hear once again the story of an old man and old woman, holy and secluded in the temple, hoping and waiting for Good News—news that was worth living a long time to hear. But the story is much more than just a feel-good moment. As Simeon gives Jesus back to Mary, he, almost coincidentally, makes an ominous warning to her that as Jesus fulfills his ministry, “a sword will pierce through your own soul.” Can you imagine what it must have been like for this teenage mother to hear those startling words? The gospel says, “The child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.”

Suddenly our sweet story becomes more than that. We begin to ask ourselves what it means for us to give our lives to God, to live as this Christ-child grew up to live. This story of an ancient ritual morphs into a precursor for our own baptism, a map for how we too shall live our lives. Is there anything from God for which we await so devotedly that upon receiving it, we like Simeon would say, “Lord, let me now go; I've seen your salvation?” For what might we yearn that we would literally or figuratively fast and pray day in and day out for years and years as Anna did?

What I think we get from Simeon and Anna and from the faithful journey of Jesus' parents is the knowledge that these big questions exist for us as much as they did for them and that we live them out in one way or another every day of our lives—either consciously or unconsciously. What do we really care about, what do we pray about, indeed to what do we give our lives? These are the critical questions of life—not about how much money we have or how successful we are or our children are. We can spend a lifetime of unconscious living with little or no regard for what truly matters; but if we do, we will not be truly living but simply getting on, making it to the next step, the next accomplishment or acquisition. God did not create us to live like that. We are made, created in God's image, to be consequential people, people who think and feel, analyze and seek understanding, question and struggle about what truly matters—in a word, we are created to live with purpose and intention.

Over the years as a priest, people have often come to me, dealing with the question: what is the will of God for my life. Most of the time they are in search of an answer about a particular job or relationship, perhaps a vocation in the church. The question is a valid and important one; I have asked it myself on many, many occasions. But the only answer that I ever truly have, though I try to dress it up with some other words, is that God's will for us is to live consciously, purposely and lovingly. The particulars of it are thorny for sure but only as relevant as details are. If we have found a way to live consciously, purposely and lovingly, we are, *I believe*, living God's will for our lives, regardless of the particulars.

The message from Anna and Simeon is to be awake and to pray for and care about what matters. For them, to do so meant essentially giving their lives to the Temple. For most of us, that is not what it means. It means getting up every day, going to work as consciously as we can, seeking to do what we do purposefully and for good, and to do whatever we do with as much loving kindness as we can. That's it; that's what we are here for. We present ourselves over and over again at this holy altar, giving ourselves each time anew to God, seeking the holiness to which we are being called.

In the name of God: AMEN.