

## Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord

Luke 2.22-40

February 2, 2025

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The other day, as I was leaving a coffee shop, I noticed a bumper sticker near the cash register that said "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention." And I thought, "Well, the coffee's not great here but it's not infuriatingly bad. And if it were, why would the management be bringing this to my attention and inviting my outrage?"

A few days later I was talking to a friend. Not someone associated with Calvary, by the way so don't get suspicious of the surly guy in your pew. But my friend was outraged by another friend of his. And he set off into one of those rants that begin with some understandable frustration, given the foibles we humans are prone to. But in no time it had moved on to the realms of childrearing and personal hygiene and driving habits. This tirade was actually quite a thing to behold. It was like an evil movie robot that starts out at human scale but keeps unfolding itself until it's big as a skyscraper and stomping on city buses and lifting trains off their tracks.

Whether you tend to express your outrage right out loud and punctuate it with the occasional broken plate, or keep it simmering inside you, I think we all ... or at least I can recognize outrage's way of consuming all of my attention when I'm in its grip. Especially when I keep adding tinder to its fire.

Well. Why in the world would a preacher bring up the attention consuming nature of outrage in a sermon on the sweet story of the Presentation of Jesus in the temple? Well, the first answer is simply that we bring what we've got, to quote another wise friend. I think our task as Christians is to entrust the lives we're actually living to holy scripture. Trusting scripture isn't about simply saying, "I believe that happened," any more than trusting a friend is about saying, "I believe you exist." Trusting scripture is about bringing our lived experiences and honest questions to these biblical stories and trying to hear what they speak back to our lives. And the second answer is that I really do think that the question of attention is a theme in the gospel of Luke.

There is a sweet calm to today's gospel reading that is surely the opposite of outrage. Mary and Joseph bring their eight day old firstborn to the temple, faithful Jews that they were. They also bring turtledoves or pigeons, the offerings of the poor. They meet Simeon there. A righteous and devout old man who looked forward to the consolation of Israel. What a lovely phrase. Consolation. The consoling of his people in a hard and unjust world is what Simeon prayed and longed and looked for, we're told. And the Holy Spirit rested upon him.

The couple also meet Anna. She is a prophet, the text says, a designation not even given to righteous Simeon. Anna was always at the temple. Day and night, it seemed. You know the type, don't you. Grounded and prayerful and wise and present. Not holding forth from pulpits so much as patiently, faithfully, persistently laying the deep footings of prayer and quiet service that the life of a congregation rests upon. When Nietzsche wrote of a "long obedience in the same direction," it's the Annas and Simeons of the world who come to my mind.

Jesus is still just a squirming infant when God reveals something to each of these saints. The Spirit tells Simeon that he will not see death before he sees God's anointed one. The bearer of the consolation he's been looking for. And the Spirit wells up in Anna that day too. She praises God and speaks about the child to anyone who is also looking for Jerusalem to be redeemed. Which must have meant anyone hoping for a day when the holy city would no longer be ruled by the occupying forces of Rome. At least this is what seemed to be top of mind for most of the people longing for Messiah to come. It was what the closest friends and disciples of this Jesus were still hoping and praying for a few decades on when he begins to teach and to heal. Anna and Simeon receive revelations that day in the temple.

The other day, a group of us were discussing a chapter in *The Luminous Web*, a beautiful little book about science and religion by Barbara Brown Taylor. At one point she says that science proceeds by observation while religion depends on revelation. But the group noted that even revelation often depends on our receptiveness to it. It depends on our attention being open to whatever God might be revealing to us in a moment.

In fact, Barbara says the Bible is full of stories about how our beliefs and certainties are what trip us up. How many people couldn't see Jesus as Messiah, because they were too certain about what the Messiah was supposed to look like when he came? Barbara Brown Taylor defines faith as a radical openness to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Which, to my mind, means faith is a kind of unbiased attention. Faith is holding our certainties and assumptions loosely enough to see the world in front of us for what it is. Especially when it's not what we were expecting to see. Unlike Jesus's own disciples so often, Anna and Simeon had the kind of faith and sacred attention that allowed them to receive their revelations from the Spirit.

Years ago the New Testament scholar, Luke Timothy Johnson, upended my reading of two of the best known scenes in Luke. Maybe you remember the story of Mary and Martha. Mary sits at Jesus's feet and listens to him, and Martha was "distracted by many tasks," the text says. Jesus says, quite tenderly, I think, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part." When you heard the story, probably you or someone nearby got a little indignant and said something about the world needing Marthas too, Jesus. Someone has to do the dishes after all.

But what Luke Timothy Johnson points out is that this story is a continuation of the one that immediately precedes it. To a lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan. I think you know that one too. In turn, two religious leaders walk to the other side of the road, avoiding the wounded victim of a robbery. They were on their way to some important churchy business, no doubt. But a Samaritan, a heretic foreigner, stops and offers neighborly help and hospitality to the man. Johnson says both stories are about attention. Sometimes the opportunity we need to be open to seeing is the need of the wounded person in front of us. Sometimes the opportunity inviting our attention is the presence of Jesus. Divine Love, which asks only that we let go of our distractions and open ourselves fully to its embrace. What Jesus is asking us in those two stories is to have the kind of attention that will see the difference when the time comes.

Here's a brand new little parable, at no extra cost, about how outrage, in particular, might be the distraction from what is needed in a moment. Suppose someone runs a red light and plows into the side of my car. I know. It's a stretch for you Memphians. But try to imagine it. When the EMT arrives, I actually don't want to see her pounding on the hood of the other guy's car and screaming at him through the windshield. No matter how much he

deserves her outrage, we need all of her attention to focus on any injuries that might have occurred. And she almost certainly *will* react in just this way because she has been trained to do so. She's been trained to override all the other emotions that overwhelm us in an emergency, so that she can focus all of her attention on what's needed most. So she can choose the better part, if you will. Maybe we need a similar kind of training for our attention to the world.

I think it's the fact that Anna and Simeon were elders that presses the question upon me of how I train my attention, over the course of my life, to be more present to the actual opportunities God is calling me to in a moment. How do I become a little more like Anna? A little more like Simeon? Those wise and gentle EMTs of the soul.

Well, I don't have a foolproof ten step plan for you. But I am pretty sure a higher daily dose of outrage is not what my soul needs if it's to pay a more Christlike attention to this world. So here's one last thought.

If you come to Evensong here tonight, or if you've ever prayed Compline, you've experienced the Song of Simeon in a particular context. For centuries, Christians have sung or spoken Simeon's words as our own prayers at the end of the day. "Lord, you now have set your servant free," we pray, "to go in peace as you have promised; For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see..."

On the face of it, it's a strange prayer to say. Simeon is holding the infant Jesus in his arms when he prays it. And he's an old man, saying that he's ready now to die. The monastics did call sleep a "little death." We lay each day to rest, in a way, don't we? But we also pray Simeon's grateful words about his eyes having seen the Savior. Why should we pray that? Unless every day that we're alive in this world Jesus will make an appearance. Perhaps the ancient wisdom is that, as we lay another day to rest, we remember where we met Jesus today, where we experienced divine love. And if we missed it, the prayer is a gentle reminder that it's not because Jesus wasn't present. It's because our attention was elsewhere. Whether we noticed or not, Jesus was present to us today. And he will be tomorrow. Whether in the face of a neighbor who needs our compassion and our care, or whether in the Divine Love that asks us, in some moments, to set aside our striving and our doing and simply rest in its healing embrace. Jesus will be present. Our work is to be open and attentive to his presence in whatever form it takes.

Friends, I don't actually know what it is that's pulling your attention away from what a moment of your life might be offering up to you. What I do know is that there is something in the attention of Simeon and Anna I want to live toward. Something in their faith that I hope to learn over time. If you do too, I suppose we could start here and now. Together. Turning our attention away from the outrage or the distractions or the worries that keep clamoring for it, and giving thanks to God for saints like Anna and Simeon. Perhaps even praying that God make each of us a little more like Jesus, by making each of us a little more like them.