

**The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple**  
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*Malachi 3:1-4*

*Psalm 84*

*Hebrews 2:14-18*

*Luke 2:22-40*

We may forget this at times, but we Episcopalians are very much a people of “tradition.” *Traditionally*, this Sunday is observed as “The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple.” *Traditionally*, this is a Sunday when we honor the presence of children amongst us. *Traditionally*, it is a Sunday for children’s choirs, and a lovely Sunday for baptizing babies. In fact, this sense of “tradition” is so important to us, that we interpret the lessons appointed for the day almost completely through the lens of our tradition, the lens of this being “Presentation Sunday.”

Looking at the word through the lens of who we are as a tradition and who we are as a worshipping community, is important. We know “who we are”, in part, precisely because we have “traditional” ways of reading and understanding the Bible.

But this morning, as we continue to have these “ongoing conversations” in our Anglican Communion, in our Episcopal Church, and even in our diocese - conversations that touch on how we read the Bible, and how we understand the authority of scripture - well, this morning I find myself asking is “what would today’s lesson say to us if we let it just stand on its own, instead of reading it through the lens of today being Presentation Sunday.”

What *would* we hear if we went to today’s gospel and didn’t look at it through the lens of presentation, and purification, and Candlemas. Would the message of the text stay the same? Would the text have something different? Would the text have something new?

As we step into today’s reading, the first thing that we might notice is that Mary and Joseph are still in Bethlehem, and on the fortieth day after Jesus’ birth, they are going to the Temple in Jerusalem to present the child. This movement, from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, is going to be an important theme throughout the gospel story. In Luke’s Gospel, Jerusalem is not only a geographical place but also a theological space. It is as if the Jerusalem Temple were another character, and a very important one at that, in this developing story of Jesus. Jerusalem, is a

character that “stands” for many things: a religious center, a political center, and also a symbol of Israel as God’s people. That’s why it is important for Mary and Joseph to move to Jerusalem and to be in the Temple, because one of the points that Luke wants to make is that it essential that we read the story of Jesus in continuity with God’s ongoing relationship with Israel, the People of God.

And here, in Jerusalem, we find Simeon, a “righteous” man, a man who is devout and looking forward to the consolation of Israel. Led by the Holy Spirit, Simeon goes to the temple and finds Joseph and Mary, a very “ordinary” encounter that becomes extraordinary, because Simeon is given the eyes to see something of the activity of God in this very traditional and simple Jewish family - a man, a woman, a baby, and recognize in this baby the fulfillment of God’s promise. First, the fulfillment of God’s promise to Simeon himself, because God had revealed to him that He would not die until he saw the Constellation of Israel, and then, also, the fulfillment of God’s promise to all of God’s people.

And here we touch on tradition again, because Simeon’s words as he holds the child Jesus are words that our worshipping tradition has also held, and loved. This is known as the “Nunc Dimittis,” one of the Canticles that is traditional sung or said at Evening Prayer. *Lord, you now have set your servant free 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; a light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel.*

I have prayed these words many, many times. As a hospital chaplain, I often sang or prayed this Canticle at people’s bedsides in the evenings, and sometimes at the bedside of the dying, a fitting last song for the end of our human lives. But if we put the words back into the context of the story, what we have here is Luke making a powerful statement, *not only is the child Jesus the fulfillment of God’s promise to Simeon, not only is the child Jesus the fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel, the glory of Israel, but this child Jesus is the expansion of God’s promises to Israel so that through Israel God’s blessing might touch the Gentiles, the whole world, and all of us.* It is a powerful statement of the expansion of God’s activity, a powerful statement of the universality of God’s plan of salvation. Not only is Jesus the fulfillment of the hopes of the people of Israel, Jesus is the fulfillment of the hopes and the needs of the entire world.

And you and I are in this place because we stand as inheritors of that expansion of God’s activity. We are those gentiles and those nations to whom the fulfillment of

God's promise expanded, because, through Israel, God opened his plan of salvation so that all people can know God's power and God's blessing.

As the Gospel story will tell us, God's blessing in Jesus touches many people who are in desperate need. People who are hungry and thirsty, people who are poor, people who are sick – they all become recipients of God's blessing in Jesus. But as Jesus' ministry develops, - there is also something that puts itself in opposition to the work of Jesus. And the ministry of Jesus is also a ministry of judgment, and the judgment has to do with whether we receive God's activity in Christ or whether we oppose God's activity in Christ and align ourselves with the powers that are going to reject him.

This judgement is not something we talk about often in the Episcopal Church. But if we are to be faithful to the direction of the Gospel story, it is essential that we know that Jesus the baby becomes Jesus the man, and Jesus' ministry brings great healing but it also brings judgement, a sword. As a community, we are challenged to ask ourselves not only how are we embodying fulfillment of blessings through Christ, but also how we may be opposing God's blessing and fulfillment of promise through this same Christ.

As we move through the season of Epiphany and as we get closer to the season of Lent, it is my hope that we will continue to allow ourselves to be "disturbed" by reading the story of the Gospel through new eyes. It is an invitation to live with faithfulness. It is an invitation to know that in the same way that God made promises to Israel and brought about their fulfillment, that same God makes promises to us, the people of St. Wilfrid's, and invites us in faith to walk with people like Anna and Simeon and wait for the fulfilling of God's promises and of God's blessing, and of God's power in our community today.

As Pastor Michael reminded us last week, all of the resources are here. There is community, there is blessing, there is word, there is love, there is service, there is wisdom. The question that we have again this morning, is how do we as individuals, as families, and as a family of faith, hear again the promises of God's activity in our community. How do we stand, open and willing and expectant, to be the embodiment of the fulfillment of God's promise and God's blessing in the world that God has created and loves.

Amen