

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence

The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple

February 2, 2025

St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, OH

Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

On the second of February the Church marks the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple. And about once every six or seven years, when this feast falls on a Sunday, it takes precedence over anything else being celebrated. All that to say, because it is rarely celebrated on a Sunday, this feast is a rather obscure one on the calendar for most churches. So what do we celebrate today on this Feast of the Presentation? Well, the answer to that is: actually, multiple things. On this day, forty days after the birth of Jesus, his parents made the over 60-mile journey to Jerusalem to present Jesus in the temple in order to perform some rites that were custom for Jewish parents at the time. And it was during this visit to the temple that something miraculous happens- two people, Simeon and Anna, see with their own eyes the savior of the world. In this season after the Epiphany, a season where we mark the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ- in this season, along with the story of the Baptism of Jesus, the wedding at Cana, and others, we get another story of God being revealed to the world, this time to Simeon and Anna.

In this story of revelation, I want to focus on an important detail this morning- and that is- HOW the revelation happened. Luke tells us that Simeon was looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit appeared and told Simeon that he would not die until he laid eyes on the one that would bring salvation to God's people. And then, we're told that the prophet Anna was also at the temple that day, and while we're not told about any specific interactions she might have had with the Holy Spirit, we DO know, by virtue of her being a prophet, she had lived her life's calling, like other prophets, calling people to repentance and proclaiming God's hope to the world. It might even be safe to assume that she had preached and prophesied many times about this consolation of Israel that Simeon had so looked forward to.

So the stage is set- these two people who longed for the Messiah, longed for the salvation of God's people, are in the temple on this day, and in walks the holy family. And as soon as Simeon and Anna lay their eyes on this forty day old child, their very lives change. All they had hoped for and prayed for and longed for and fasted for, all of a sudden here he was, in their very midst. Held in the arms of his young mother, here was the consolation of Israel in human form. Here was God's Good News incarnated- living, and breathing. And how does Simeon respond seeing this consolation of God's people for which he had so deeply longed? He says, "God I can die a happy man. You have kept your word, and I have been able to lay my eyes on the person that will bring your salvation. Those who come after me will get to experience your salvation, but just seeing your salvation this day is enough. Your salvation is a light to all people and glory to your people Israel."

These words of Simeon have so inspired Christians in all times and places, that the words have been set to music over and over. [*We will hear our choir sing Herbert Brewer's beautiful setting of these words of Simeon's later in the service.*]

Here at St. Paul's, at 9am on Thursday mornings every week, a small group of folks meet for Bible study. This study is usually hosted by the preacher on deck, and the group takes a deep dive into the readings for the coming Sunday. With my being scheduled to preach today, it was my privilege to get study with this group this week. I always gain much inspiration for my sermons when I get to lead the Thursday morning Bible study, and this week was no different. (By the way, this Bible study is open to all, and I encourage you to drop in some time. The community and time of study I have found to be such a gift, and I know you will find it to be the same for you, too.) This week one of the participants presented such a poignant question that has remained with me for the last few days, and that question is this: How did Simeon and Anna *know* they had laid their eyes on the Messiah? (pause)

Hmmm. I have to admit- this question stopped me in my tracks. After all, Jesus was only just over a month old. I've seen enough babies to know that most babies this young look very much alike- you know, the bald head and sweet smile. And we certainly aren't told the Holy Spirit gave Simeon or Anna any indication of what to look for. And yet, here he was. And yet, they knew. And while I still don't have a perfect answer to the question brought up at Bible study, here's what I've come up with so far- sometimes we encounter God through studying *about* God- learning from thousands of years of scholarship through the study of scripture, taking in wisdom passed down from generation to generation of the faithful. We might say this way of knowing involves learning *about* God. And then- there is whole other way of learning about God. Have you ever looked at a sunset and gotten lost in the colors? Have you ever glimpsed the divine in the soft warmth of a child? Or perhaps in the consolation of the unconditional love of a pet? In those moments, we cease knowing only *about* those things or those people, and we *experience* them. A deeper part of our being connects to creation in that sunset, or that child, or that pet, we all of a sudden know with out heart. We move from knowing about, and we move into knowing through experience. I think that's what the story of Simeon and Anna call us to today, what this obscure Feast of the Presentation teaches us: God comes to us in many ways- through study and learning, but also through experiencing.

Jesus would also go on decades later to teach us about this deeper way of knowing through experience. Though Jesus did teach *about* God, Jesus also taught us that we would *find* God through experience- in the eyes of the stranger, in the pleas of the hungry, in the cries of the widow and orphan. Jesus taught us that if we wanted to encounter God, the creator of the Universe, we would meet God in those folks who lived on the margins of society- the lost and left out, the misunderstood, those living in desperate situations. In our own time, God still meets us in those who live on the margins- the poor, the disabled, the stranger in our land, the trans person, those experiencing homelessness, and the list goes on and on. "For when you have showed compassion and mercy and understanding and kindness to those whom society calls least of these, so you have done it to God."

The last thing I think we celebrate in this Feast of the Presentation is the hope that is born in the fulfillment God's promise that God did reveal God's self to Simeon and Anna. And God continues to reveal God's self to us today. In our world that for so many feels dark right now and where there are plenty of reasons to be afraid, God says, "I am still showing up. You can anchor your hope in my presence that is always with you. Even when it is hard to find me, I am there. Search for me. Cling to the promise that I will never leave you or forsake you, and I am with you even to the end of the earth."

Like Simeon and Anna, if we can grasp ahold of that promise and allow ourselves to see God, even in such a time as this, we can find a reason to hope and a reason to continue to build God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Rejoice! A light to enlighten the nations is in our very midst! Amen.