

The Feast of the Presentation

Year A, RCL

February 2, 2020

North Fork Ministries

Gospel:

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.

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In today's Gospel reading, we learn of Old Simeon, righteous and devout Simeon, the Holy Spirit resting upon his tired

shoulders, maybe kept alive into old age by the promise that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. And the promise was fulfilled when he walked into the Temple in Jerusalem and saw Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus, there to ritually enact the rite of purification, circumcision, according to the law of Moses. And so he praises God for the glimpse he has been given of the child who would bring revelation to the Gentiles and glory to the people of Israel.

And we are told of the ancient widow Anna, always present at the temple, praying night and day and fasting, who upon seeing Jesus, praised God, and couldn't stop telling everyone who sought redemption, about the child she had seen.

I've heard it suggested that it might not have been such a remarkable coincidence that Simeon hobbled into the temple at just the moment that Mary and Joseph came in to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and present Jesus for ritual purification.

It may have been that Simeon, like the ever-faithful Anna, spent most of his days at the temple as well. And here is the part that I really like about the idea of Simeon passing the waning years of his life at the Temple: Imagine that he was there so that every single child brought by their parents into the temple also, like Jesus, received Simeon's blessing and heard, and took to heart, what we call Simeon's Song:

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.

Every child deserves the blessing of Simeon. If only every child born into the world received God's blessing through a people that sees all its children as a fulfillment of God's promise and then raises them up with the expectation that they too are destined for greatness.

If you have been present for the baptism of a child at Holy Trinity or Redeemer, you know how much we delight in the sacrament.

With water we recognize rebirth and with chrism and the sign of the cross we mark the baptismal candidate, as Christ's own forever. It is my custom, during the passing of the peace, for to carry the child among you, for you to congratulate the newly baptized and to welcome them into the community of faith. And like a whole congregation of Simeons and Annas we offer them our blessing, and pledge to support them as they live into the greatness that God has in store for them. With our blessings we let them know that the favor of God rests upon them and that the future is in their hands.

After giving his blessing to the Holy Family, Simeon then offered these words of warning to 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." Simeon's words must have caused Mary to feel a chill up her spine and to shiver with apprehension. It is a chilling prospect for every parent, but they are words of truth that might as well be called out at every birth and every baptism.

In other words, Simeon said, "This child is going to break your heart." And they do. Your children will ignore you, rebel

against you, disappoint you, and, ultimately, abandon you. Simeon, at the presentation of Jesus at the temple, so no reason to pretend otherwise. A sword was going to pierce Mary's soul with the pain of the sword that would pierce Jesus' side. We suffer as our children suffer.

This celebration at the temple, the ritual purification of Jesus and Mary and Joseph's sacrificial offering, contained within it both the element of celebration and the hard truth of what the future held. That is at the core of why we have the sacraments, and why we choose, why we need, to form rituals around life's major transitions. The sacraments of baptism and communion, marriage, reconciliation, confirmation, ordination, healing - and the elaborate rituals we construct around death and burial, enable us, give us permission, to feel to the depth of our souls, all that life has to offer.

Our sacraments are celebrations, but they are celebrations that do not shy away from the prospect of sorrow and pain and loss.

Ritual, at its best, contains all the glorious and heartbreaking elements of which life is made.

In fact, I don't think we ritualize quite enough. I'm inclined to think that we don't just need a ritual to celebrate marriage, but that divorce should be marked by ritual as well. And maybe we need to acknowledge, not just the occasion of a person's death, but also the loss that is remembered upon the anniversary of a loved one's passing. We can't ignore the importance of the day on which you start a new job, or the day you lose one. Or the time when we get a new puppy, or when a long faithful pet is put to sleep. And maybe we need a way of celebrating when a child leaves home, or

marking the day when the same child, with an uncertain future, returns home.

We don't want life to slip past us unnoticed. And not just noticing events with a passing glance, but shaking ourselves awake to the passage of time, to bring each of life's precious and painful moments into the light of day. Ritual calls out to us and to those around us, and saying, "This is important, pay attention."

What I'm really talking about is practicing the sacrament of the present moment. It is possible to sleepwalk through ritual, in the same way it is possible to sleepwalk through life. At its best ritual can be used to bring life and light to the passage of events that otherwise might go unnoticed. At the same time an awareness of the present moment can ensure that the sacraments themselves are brought to life. One influences the other. We practice our rituals as we practice our lives.

Mary and Joseph brought Jesus with them to the temple, simply in order to fulfill the requirements of faithful practice of their religion, the requirements of the law of their Lord. But they returned to their home in Galilee in amazement, having experienced God's revelation for them and their child, through Simeon and Anna, who, awakened to the presence of Spirit, could see what God had in store for them and their child. May the diligent practice of our faith, and the blessed company of God's faithful people, guide us as well.