

Epiphany Presentation of Christ/Candlemas (tr.)
Psalm 84:1-6; Luke 2:22-40

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Epiphany is a season in which we are each invited as individuals to ponder the identity of Jesus and how we respond to his incarnation. We started the season with a big bang – the Three Kings from foreign lands trekking to a humble stable and falling to their knees at the presence of this baby. Each successive week we have been witnesses to Jesus revealed as the messiah: at his baptism, at a wedding in Cana, at a synagogue reading the scroll of Isaiah, and now we are brought back to the beginning of the story when the baby Jesus was presented at the Temple. It's almost as if we were left last week astounded and agog with the people of Nazareth as Jesus announced, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" and Mary, his mother, has stepped in and said, well you know when I presented him at the Temple as a baby, this happened..."

Today we celebrate the presentation of Jesus at the Temple. What kind of day was it for Mary and Joseph? I would imagine it was much like each of the days I presented one of my infant children at church: a thrill at standing at the font, at the center of the Church, holding my baby before the community, and then offering the child to the priest for dedication to God. For us, we mark such dedication with baptism. For Mary and Joseph, "they 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." Surely they were happy that day – but St. Luke lets us assume that and he focuses his attention – our attention – on what is happening at the sidelines with Simeon and Anna. The people at the center of the Temple, the priests, are not the ones who witnessed that this was the not just any baby but the long-awaited "redemption of Israel." They just saw turtledoves and pigeons.

The fact that Luke draws our attention to the sidelines resonated with me as I thought about recent events in the Anglican Communion. You may have just asked yourself, "what event in the Anglican Communion?" That is entirely okay and in fact, is my point. In a nutshell, the head bishops from each of the 38 provinces of the Anglican Communion met in Canterbury, England for their regular get together. There was a great deal of tension as the Primates gathered, around the church in the US, the Episcopal Church's decision at our General Convention to develop a liturgy for same-sex marriage. The tension is okay – many of these bishops come from places where homosexuality is against the law – even the public discussion of such matters would place the church in grave danger. We have many good and faithful people within the Episcopal Church who are struggling with the issue as well. Being in the Anglican Tradition is all about living together in tension and the Primates in their statement did emphasize our continued togetherness in our common walk in faith. What the Primates decided to do was to impose a "consequence" for the actions of the Episcopal Church as distant from where the other Provinces are on the issue:

"given the seriousness of these matters we formally acknowledge this distance by requiring that for a period of three years The Episcopal Church no longer represent us on ecumenical and interfaith bodies, should not be appointed or elected to an internal standing committee and that while participating in the internal bodies of the Anglican Communion, they will not take part in decision making on any issues pertaining to doctrine or polity."

As members of the Episcopal Church, we are essentially in detention. I thought of a movie from the '80's, from my teenaged years, "the Breakfast Club." For various infractions of school rules, five teens are told to sit in the school library and do absolutely nothing at their desks but write an essay for eight hours on a Saturday. They are each the embodiment of a high school stereotype: a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. I feel like we are that group of misfits as the Episcopal Church. We will be in detention for the next three years. What will our detention time be like on the sidelines of the Church?

St. Luke takes the focus in the Temple away from the center, where the priests were doing the official actions with the turtledoves and pigeons and he wants us to listen to the crowd who witnessed the dedication of this baby and take note of their reaction. It is at the sidelines, in the prophetic voices of Simeon and Anna we find the swallows and sparrows of Psalm 100:

2 *The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young; *
by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.*

3 *Happy are they who dwell in your house! *
they will always be praising you.*

I find the image of sparrows and swallows fill me with warmth and joy on this cold winter morning. Biblical scholar Ellen Davis wrote that “the psalm appointed for the day is something like a red X on the map posted at various stations along a hiking trail, advising the bewildered: “you are here.”ⁱ The psalm for today is “instructed emotion”ⁱⁱ that helps us feel what the readings bring to the day we mark with our liturgy. Today, as the gospel of St. Luke takes us to the Temple in Jerusalem we are invited by the appointed psalm to feel the joy and freedom of sparrows and swallows finding the ultimate shelter for their nests and for their young: by the side of the altar of the Lord.

Simeon and Anna did not have official roles within the structure of the Temple. They had been building their nests by the side of the altar of the Lord and they were present at the sidelines to delight that their hopes for the People of God were being fulfilled in the baby Jesus. St. Luke tells us that “guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus... 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.” Anna had been a regular fixture of Temple life as a widow: praying and worshiping and fasting each day for more years than anyone one could count. St. Luke figured it to be at least sixty years or more. As Simeon finished delighting in the baby Jesus, Anna came up “and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” She too attested to Jesus as the Messiah. Simeon and Anna’s hearts flew with joy as God fulfilled his promise to His People within their time. Being on the outside left Simeon and Anna as free as swallows and sparrows to speak freely and to delight in the amazing incarnation of the Messiah. Their freedom at the sidelines made them open and ready to receive their Epiphany experience.

So what are we doing in the sidelines? As a priest, I do feel warned to keep from over-focusing on the official “center” of my work-life: the worship, the polity of the Church. At heart, I am one of the Breakfast Club. By the end of that movie, after the kids had opened up to one another and found common ground and even real friendships, they realized that they are each complicated individuals: that they each are in part a brain, an athlete, a basket case, a princess, and a criminal. Another way to say it is that they found they were each part rebel with a cause, they were each capable of intelligent insight, they became aware of their own self-righteousness and fear of those not like them, and that they each sometimes worried they didn’t fit in.

While the officials of the Church focus on turtledoves and pigeons, on the politics and “consequences” for which they send us to detention, I propose that we focus on the sidelines like Luke. I propose we focus on the ways we are the swallows and sparrows. We have built a nest here at Grace Church: the twigs woven together of worship, baptisms, fellowship, and holding each other up in hard times and weaving a beautiful complex and strong nest in which we live together. In our time on the sidelines of detention as the Breakfast Club, I hope we get up to some shenanigans, the kind that are about real life and the deep common issues that we share and that bind us together. That despite our differences we continually lift up the numerous important things we have in common. With that deep joy of the swallows and sparrows that dwell by the altars of the Lord, we are able to join with Simeon and Anna and proclaim together that Jesus is the incarnate God who dwells among us. Amen.

ⁱ *Wondrous Depth: Preaching the Old Testament*, Ellen Davis (WJK: 2005), p19.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p21.