

Candlemas
Luke 2:22-40

The Rev. Leslie Nunez Steffensen
January 29, 2017

In today's gospel reading, St. Luke tells us, "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." This would have been the 40th day after Jesus' birth. Under the Covenant, observant Jews would have been doing three main things: seeking purification for the mother after childbirth, presenting the newborn child to God, and making an offering according to the Law. These three gestures would have been done with great faith on behalf of families that they were doing what pleased God. They also sought God's favor and blessing over their children. We can imagine many of the same hopes they carried in their hearts as they approached the temple and sought the priests to help them attend to this holy moment – we carry the same feelings as we present our children for baptism. It is a moment for the parents and for the community to celebrate and welcome a child. But as St. Luke describes it, the day of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple was different from the usual presentation day for a Jewish child. Voices interrupted the usual rituals and blessing spoken by the priests.

As Mary and Joseph prepared to hand the baby Jesus to the priests, Simeon interrupted the ritual. He "came into the temple; and...and took him in his arms and praised God." Then as he looked at the baby in his arms he said...

"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."

Simeon blessed baby Jesus and then continued, saying 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." And then Anna, a widow who prayed daily at the Temple interrupted too. "She began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Imagine a baptism here at Grace, and two people jump up from the congregation and take the baby from me or Fr. Malm and begin to preach, recite scripture from heart, and to praise God with joy. Luke is careful to note for us that these were not crazy people. This was Simeon, "this man was righteous and devout...and the Holy Spirit rested on him." This was the widow Anna, "the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age...She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day." Anna was wise, and an elder, and known for her pious devotion to God. Luke is telling us, you can trust these two. They are righteous and devout and Anna is a prophet.

These two voices change the day of Jesus' presentation at the Temple. What was framed in ritual became a different kind of event – a day when a precious child was offered to God and the prophets proclaimed Jesus as the light, the glory, and the redemption of the world. These prophetic voices frame how Jesus is going to be in the world, and even where his life will go, from this joyous epiphany of the identity of baby Jesus proclaimed in the Temple to a foreshadowing of the heartbreak that Mary and we all will experience as we head to the cross on Good Friday, for "a sword will pierce your own soul too." We celebrate and mark this day as "Candlemas," when we pray for God's blessing upon and carry candles. We literally carry the

light into the world on this day. As I was thinking about the light and all that it symbolizes for Christians, I kept getting interrupted by the urgent voices of Simeon and Anna, proclaiming light, glory, and redemption. We are really good with candles and light, but where are we with God's glory and redemption? Where are we with allowing the sword to pierce our soul? There is a note of warning from Simeon – this baby Jesus heralds in an age the People of God have yearned for but it is going to hurt deeply before we get to the best part of the story.

One of the many ways that I have grown into my priesthood over my years here at Grace has been finding my preaching voice. I have found it natural for me to connect with you all by telling personal stories and experiences that connect the Scripture of the day to our common human experience. That story telling has become something more within me. It isn't just a professional development thing – it's a calling that feels like it comes from deep within, to connect our lives to what the Scripture is revealing to us – finding where the rubber hits the proverbial road for each of us in our faith journeys.

Simeon and Anna play this role for us today. At Christmas, we easily celebrate a baby born in a manger a long, long, time ago. We easily celebrate the Three Kings as they come to adore this same baby and kicking off the season of Epiphany, as we contemplate each week how Jesus was revealed to the world as the Christ. On this Sunday, in the midst of Epiphany, we get back to the baby Jesus and his presentation at the Temple and it should all be light and sweet - but Simeon and Anna interrupt. We receive this child, Jesus, as the light – but we must also receive him as the sword that will pierce our souls. Our very being is defined by this receiving. Jesus will change us and that will at times be a very hard thing.

He died for us on a cross, and that was a very hard thing but somehow necessary to the joy of the salvation story. Receiving Christ means acknowledging our need for him – our own sins, our own brokenness, our own frailty. The Good News is that Jesus saves and redeems us. The hard news is we have to do our own work in the bargain: we must change. The change is not a matter of doing steps 1, 2, and 3. That was the Old Covenant. The New Covenant is harder because it is about allowing our hearts be broken by this child and re-shaped. To follow this child means we do as he commands us: to love our neighbors as ourselves, to love one another as He loved us. That means loving our enemies, praying for them and insisting on peace, which is really creating space for their welfare; it means caring for well-being and health of the poor and vulnerable as if they were our own beloved babies; it means seeking justice and mercy for even the most reviled of criminals, as Jesus did for the thief who hung on the cross next to him. These things are hard to imagine but that is the radical nature of the grace and love of Christ. This is where the rubber has hit the road, because it is not enough that Jesus did what he did: we are called to do the same. The sword that is this baby Jesus pierces our hearts and it hurts because we are challenged and changed by His love.

We offer this baby, Jesus, to the world. We offer all his coming means: hope, joy, and a new way for the People of God to be. Each generation of Christians has done this – some generations better than others, but the challenge of this baby comes for each generation. The challenge for us is to receive this child, to follow him, and to proclaim him to the world in the fullness of his glory and the fullness of his self-sacrificing love, as Simeon and Anna did.

Amen.