

“Dedicated to God”

I am very excited today. As your bulletin notes, today we mark Jesus’ Presentation in the Temple. It is unusual to hear these readings in church on Sunday, because this feast day is associated with a specific date. That date, February 2nd, only falls on a Sunday every five to seven years. In other years the feast is marked but not with the emphasis it gets on a Sunday. Even this Sunday the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple for many in the U.S. will be overshadowed by Groundhog Day (pun intended), and has to compete with the Super Bowl (pun also intended). If one needs any evidence that the world is becoming more secular here it is. But enough of my kvetching.

It is not just that it is exciting to have the Presentation in the Temple on a Sunday it is exciting to look at the Gospel story relayed to us by Luke. It is a unique story that only Luke tells. It includes Jewish religious practices, it tells us about Jesus’ family, we hear a prophetic song, the text foreshadows the power of Jesus’ ministry, and because Luke likes doing things in pairs he has both a man and a woman affirm Jesus’ Messiahship. This is beautiful writing.

As I mentioned we get to hear about significant Jewish practices associated with the birth of a child. In the verses just prior to our reading we hear that eight days after his birth Jesus is circumcised and named. This Jewish practice goes back to Abraham and is still carried on today. Then we hear that Jesus, as a first-born male child, is presented in the Temple. That is what brings the Holy Family to Jerusalem. They are fulfilling two religious practices: the ritual purification of a woman who has given birth, and redeeming the first born son. Mary was ritually unclean for thirty days after giving birth. She is presenting herself in the Temple to be pronounced pure again. Together Mary and Joseph are presenting Jesus to God as an offering and then making a sacrifice to God so that they might keep him. It is a way of honoring God for the gift of a child and especially the first-born son.

What this tells us about Mary and Joseph is that they are devout Jews. They follow the Law of Moses in circumcision, naming, purification of Mary, presenting the first born, sacrifice, and even going to the lengths to do perform the last two in the Temple in Jerusalem. What’s more, the poverty of this family is affirmed. The prescribed sacrifice is a lamb and a dove, but a poor family may give two doves and that is the offering this family makes. Luke is giving us important information about the faithfulness of this family.

Literarily, the center of this passage is the Song of Simeon also called the Nunc Dimmitis. The first part of Luke is like a Broadway musical. Every time something important happens someone breaks into song. In this case it is Simeon. We are not exactly sure of his status. He is not called a priest, but he is definitely holy. God has promised him he will not die before seeing the Messiah. We are also told that the Holy Spirit is upon him, and the Holy Spirit directs him to the Temple that day. When he sees the little family he goes to them and takes the child in his arms and sings a song of praise to God for the gift of the Messiah. Now he can die in peace.

But there is more prophecy as Simeon blesses the family (so maybe he is a priest), and tells the amazed parents that Jesus is destined for the falling and rising of many, that some will oppose him, and even Mary’s soul will be pierced. If the parents

were not amazed before they would be amazed, and perhaps frightened, at this prophecy. Simeon has told them that this little boy is going to shake things up in Israel, and not everything is going to go easily for him or for them. I expect most parents would not welcome such a forecast about their newborn.

But before they have time to react they are approached by another person. In this case a woman named Anna (perhaps another allusion to Hannah in the Book of Samuel). This woman is a devout widow who actually lives in the Temple (remember the Temple environs are huge with multiple courtyards and arcades). She, too, praises the child as the redeemer of Jerusalem. It is worth noting that Anna is of the Tribe of Asher. Asher means “happiness” or “blessing.” Asher, one of Jacob’s sons, was said to be honest and always seeking harmony with his brothers. In rabbinic literature the Tribe of Asher is associated with an abundance of male children, beautiful daughters, rich soil, and olive oil enough for all of Israel. Anna’s blessing and praise carry all of this goodness.

It is a great story that should convince anyone faithful to the Hebrew Scriptures that this is the real Messiah, but if we get wrapped up in the storytelling and beauty of the writing we might miss the relevance for you and me.

There is most certainly more than one way to look at this pericope, but what strikes me is the part of Simeon’s prophecy that comes after the song. Where he says 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 is saying to Mary and to us that this child is going to divide people as well as bring them together. There will be those who will find Jesus a stumbling block. Others will see him and his teaching as a way to closer life with God. Whichever way one sees him it will not be easy. There will be opposition and pain for believer and non-believer, alike. Even Mary, his mother, who loves him regardless of his greatness or his simplicity will be pierced (just as Jesus will be pierced on the cross). A mother might want to see her child do great things, but she would not want her child killed because of them.

Luke through Simeon is telling us that following God is not an easy road. We may be destined to do good works, but no matter what good we do there will be some who oppose it. There will be some who doubt and try to make others doubt. There will be some who are threatened by the goodness and the righteousness. There will be some who would rather hold on to their earthly power and prestige rather than give it away to follow Jesus. Perhaps that is why saints are few and so revered. But even the saints have their detractors and opponents.

Life in God is full and rich as we see in the lives of Simeon and Anna. It also requires obedience and sacrifice as we see in the lives of Joseph and Mary. In Jesus we see how true intimacy with God can transform a person and all those around him who have eyes to see and ears to hear. In this passage we are given many examples of a godly life. To live into any of them gives us the hope that, with God’s help, we too may be worthy of presentation in the temple in God’s Kingdom of love.