

Waiting, watching and discovering the glory of God

The Presentation – Luke 2:22-40

*based on a sermon by the Rev. Barrie Bates on Sermons that Work
preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, February 2, 2013*

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Today we celebrate one of the principal feasts of the Church. And, no, it has nothing to do with a ground hog. And, no, we are *not* talking about the Super Bowl! The strange thing is that, principle feast or not, I suspect many of you will *never* have heard of it. The Feast of the Presentation occurs each year on February 2nd – exactly forty days after Christmas. Most years, of course, the feast just slips by us on a weekday, with perhaps a celebration scattered here and there. Around here, the feast would have to fall on a Tuesday or Wednesday for even me to notice it, and it would get a mention at our midday Wednesday service. This year, however, February 2nd falls on a Sunday, and this great feast takes precedence over what would otherwise be the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, and since the company that ships us those neat bulletin inserts we use every week shipped us *these*, here we are.

The full name of today's feast is "the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple." It's a celebration of one of Jesus' major life events; that's what makes it a principal feast. If you happen to be a regular reader of the Anglican Digest, or if you've been around long enough and think back *really* hard, you may also have heard of it as "Candlemas," because this is the feast when candles are traditionally blessed. Or you might remember the feast as "the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary," because, as we hear in this morning's reading from Luke, the Law of Moses required that she – like the infant Jesus – participate in a rite of purification forty days after childbirth. In some places, today marks the end of the Christmas season, which is not observed as the twelve days of Christmas, but as forty days of the Incarnation.

So that's the skinny, as they say, of *why* what happened in the Temple that day... happened. Knowing what was expected of them, Joseph and Mary set off to the great Temple in Jerusalem. Being proper and devout Jews, Joseph and Mary set off with their tiny infant son and a pair of turtledoves. Mindful of what they had heard from angels and from shepherds, *and* from each other, Mary and Joseph set off to do *precisely* what was required by the law, to offer the appointed sacrifice, to pay the allotted price, to redeem, to buy back, their firstborn son.

But what happens at the Temple is nothing short of miraculous. Two prophets encounter Jesus in the Temple that day, and understand there is something special about *this* child.

First, there's Simeon. Simeon, we are told, was righteous and devout. And he had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah, the Lord's anointed. Maybe you can imagine what his life had become, living with such an awesome burden. The older he got, the more he likely asked, "Is *this* the one?" of every person he encountered. "Is today the day?" A thousand times he must have asked that question, and a thousand times he must have realized the answer, "No, not today."

But on this day, on *this* day, with eyes nearly grown blind from looking but not finding, on *this* day, with hands almost too twisted to hold him, on *this* day, Simeon takes *this* child, and sings:

"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."

It is, of course, a text well known to Anglicans as one of the usual two canticles at Evensong. And it is, of course, also a prophecy. Simeon says, basically: Today I have seen my salvation. Today I have seen my Lord. Today I have seen my Savior. Today God has made this revelation for the glory of his people. We are told that Mary and Joseph were amazed. Jesus was not yet six weeks old, and with all they had been through, they must have wondered. "Is this really what the angel promised?" "Do these shepherd really mean *our* child?" "Is it even *thinkable*, that *any* child can be the savior of humankind?"

And then there's the *other* prophet in the story, Anna. We are told she had lived eighty-four years – no easy feat in first-century Palestine, especially for a woman! Anna, we are told, prayed in the Temple every day. Anna, we are told, fasted in the Temple every night. But on this day, Anna, we are told, noticed that something was different.

She finds Mary and Joseph and the baby and begins to talk about him to anyone who would listen. "Praise be to God," she may have said, "for this truly *is* the redeemer of the world."

So we have a story, this feast day, a story we don't get to read together very often, a story about waiting, a story about watching, a story about discovery. A story about waiting for the day to come, for the savior to appear, for all things to be put right. A story about watching to see that the day *has* come, that *this* child is destined for the falling and rising of many. A story about the discovery that God has revealed all this to us: That this is the light that lightens all the world. That this child is the one who redeems all people. That this is savior who is the Anointed One, Christ the Lord.

Like the prophet Simeon, we yearn for the coming of the Messiah, for all in this world to be put right, for the hungry to be fed, for prisoners to be set free, for the sick to be healed. Like the prophet Anna, we hope that our prayer and our sacrifice and our faithfulness will be fulfilled, that equality will come for all God's people, that peace will prevail over the whole earth, that justice will conquer all oppression. And so, we believe, because we are tired of waiting. And so we believe, because we are weary of watching. And so we believe, because *we* have laid *our* hands on the truth of Christmas, the truth of Epiphany, the truth of Candlemas, the Purification, the Presentation, the blessed, but sometimes *hard* truth of the Incarnation, of God come to be with *us*.

"After the prophets have spoken," poet Howard Thurman penned,
"When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The *work* of Christmas *begins*:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart."

With Simeon, may we take that child into our arms, *and* into our hearts. With Anna, may we proclaim the Good News of God's mercy and grace. And most of all, may we take hold of the *promise*, and work, and pray and give, to make the promise of the Christ Child... real.