

Sermon Luke 2:22-39

Presentation of the Lord – Candlemas

We've seen the light – now what?

February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2025

Today, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, which, in many faith traditions, is observed as the Presentation of Jesus in the temple and the festival of Candlemas, officially marks the end of the Christmas season.

So Christmas is over. The angels and shepherds have left, the singing and praising and euphoria are long done with, the magi returned to their country by a different way. Now Mary and Joseph have to raise this wondrous infant. Who is divine, but at the same time a fully human infant, after all. Once, in the ancient German city of Aachen, I saw some relics that were displayed in the medieval cathedral, and one of them was one of the cloth diapers that Jesus supposedly had used. What a great reminder of Jesus' humanity!

And I imagine the new parents, Mary and Joseph, going through the same things any new parent goes through: post-partum depression and sleepless nights. Pride - and anxiety: how do we handle this fragile new human being? Are we doing it right? Joy – and frustration: what is he crying about now?

Christmas is definitely over – for Mary and Joseph, and for us. We have moved from the heavenly to the earthly realm, from the fantastic to the mundane, from the wonder to real life. God has arrived. God has become human. God partakes fully in our human experience. This doesn't make the story, the continuing story, less amazing or appealing. On the contrary, it continues to be amazing, because it feels and is – real, literally down to earth.

In today's gospel story, Jesus is 40 days old. According to the Mosaic Law, a woman needs to be declared ritually 'clean' and be readmitted to societal life after the birth of a child. This would be done by a priest at the temple in Jerusalem. If a woman gives birth to a boy, she is purified after 40 days. Just a footnote, if a woman gives birth to a – in those days - less desirable girl, she has to wait until the 80<sup>th</sup> day.

But this is not the point of the story. The point is that the holy family, without angelic hosts, without a bright guiding star, now looks like any other young family. They are probably not the only family that day, seeking purification. So this rather

unremarkable family enters the temple, the holiest place for the Jewish people, the place where God dwells. They come to check off one thing of their to-do-list, which is to get purified, and then to resume their ordinary lives back in Nazareth. But here, in this holy place, they and *we* are reminded that the wondrous story of God being born and becoming human isn't over.

For in the temple, two people are waiting for the Messiah to appear. In fact, they've been waiting for a long time, stubbornly hanging on to their hopes and dreams, never discouraged by the wait, never giving up. First, there is Simeon. All his long life, he's been longing and waiting for the Savior of Israel to come. However, it hasn't been an idle waiting – he hasn't been twiddling his thumbs all those years – but an active kind of waiting. We hear that he is righteous and devout, that he is living according to his faith. And it seems he has a special talent as well: the talent to listen to God, and to be open to God's Holy Spirit. I think it's no coincidence that his name is 'Simeon', which means, 'he who listens'. Now listening is more than hearing: listening implies to respond to what one hears. So Simeon seems to be a good listener, someone who listens to God's voice and who pays attention to God's signs; and so it is no surprise that it is revealed to him that the infant Jesus is the long awaited Savior.

There may be no star shining like a spotlight on baby Jesus, but I imagine it more like a lightbulb moment, and aha-moment, for Simeon, something that comes from within. And all that leads to a scene that I imagine to be one of the most moving and one of the most tender moments in the gospel: here we have the old and wise man, overjoyed, smiling, laughing, crying for joy, taking the baby boy into arms, and praising God. "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation." Simeon listens – and sees the light that shines in the darkness of the realities of the times he lives in.

And if this isn't enough to surprise and amaze Mary and Joseph, now another wise person appears, Anna, a prophet, as we hear. And, just as a reminder, prophets in the biblical tradition more often than not were at odds with the worldly powers of the day as they proclaimed God's work and God's will. Anna, for most of her long life, has lived in the temple, close to God, serving God. Another devout person hoping and longing for the redemption of God's people. And, since I talked about the meaning of Simeon's name, let me just throw out that the name 'Anna' comes from the Hebrew 'Hannah' and means 'merciful'. Mercy has always been at the

heart of the Jewish and Christian religions, and the beautiful name of ‘Hannah’ or ‘Anna’, bestowed on so many girls and women, is a testimony to that.

So here we have the one who listens, and the one who is merciful, and they rejoice and praise God and send mother, father, and child on their way with a blessing. The old welcome the young. The old embrace the new. And a new day, a new era is dawning. A new chapter is written in the story of God and humanity.

And when Mary and Joseph and the child had finished everything required by the law, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth, we read in today’s lesson. They go with a blessing, not to live happily ever after - but to live according to God’s will, and assured that God is with them. Life continues. The story continues. It may not be as spectacular as the Christmas story, but it is an important story nevertheless.

Which brings us to today. Christmas is officially over today, and I know it has been over for most – if not all - of us for a while now. Today is ‘Candlemas’, the Mass of the candles, during which traditionally candles are blessed as a reminder that Christ is the light of the world – and that we are the light of the world, as we reflect Christ’s light of love, mercy, and forgiveness and share it with all those in need, and especially those who are marginalized.

And in this context, the word ‘Mass’, as in ‘Christmas’, or ‘Candlemas’, is important. ‘Mass’ is the Latin word for ‘dismiss’, or ‘sending’. This is how the early church understood their worship, their mass: as a holy preparation for the sending into the world, into the mundane, into everyday life. ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,’ Simeon says in today’s lesson, and this is the spirit of mass, or worship.

On this day, the Mass of the Candles, that we have heard the good news of salvation and seen Christ the light of the world, we are reminded that we are now dismissed – sent - into the mundane, profane, real, and, as it seems, increasingly dark and merciless world - to bring Christ and the stubborn hope we carry in our hearts to all the places we go. To be all ears and all merciful and full of wisdom, as *we* live, not happily ever after, but according to God’s will. Christmas is over, but the story still continues - with us. My hope and prayer is that the light of Christ’s love and mercy continues to shine – as we carry it defiantly and prophetically from this place into the world. Amen

