

Feast of the Presentation, Yr. C  
February 2, 2020  
Luke 2:22-40

Today would ordinarily be celebrated as the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after the Epiphany, but since the Feast of the Presentation falls on this day, it takes precedence over the Sunday. It's an interesting day. As someone said, not even counting the Presentation, it's a trifecta today: the Super Bowl, Groundhog Day and a date that has a palindrome (when something can be read the same way whether you read back to front or front to back) 02-02-2020. It's also a day in which, some centuries ago, there was a tradition of blessing candles for the year and so it was called Candlemas Day. And there's even a poem about that:

If Candlemas be fair and bright, winter will have another flight. If  
Candlemas be cloud and rain, winter will be gone and not come again.

I suppose if one had the time, you could check to see whether that Old English saying was the forerunner of the whole Goundhog Day scheme. Perhaps someone could check that out during half time today.

Today's Gospel has Luke telling the story of Jesus as an infant – first the circumcision, just before our reading, and then the presentation of the child and purification of his mother. Jewish tradition and law held that the firstborn male child belonged to God and so the parents presented him at the temple but then, in a sense, bought him back, with a sacrifice, usually a lamb, but a pigeon could be substituted. At the same time, the mother, who would have been considered ritually impure and banned from the Temple and religious ceremonies for a period of time after giving birth, would offer a sacrifice and be 'purified' as it were.

I think it's interesting to note here that it's thought that Luke was a Gentile, writing to a Gentile community and, while all the Gospel writers were concerned about the question of continuity between Judaism and Christianity, Luke seems especially concerned to make that point. He points out, not just here, but in other places, that Jesus was a Jew and that he and his family were careful to obey the Jewish laws. So, when Jesus

would later dispute with Jewish rabbis, he was doing so as an insider, someone from within the tradition, a tradition that he knew and loved. Jesus was often challenging them with a different interpretation, but he wasn't throwing out the tradition. It was his as well as theirs.

And within Judaism the temple was key. It was the liturgical, economic and social center of the country. The identity and hope of the people were tied up with the temple. Since the exile, Israel had been invaded and conquered a number of times. You will remember that at the time of the incident we're hearing this morning, Rome would have been in control of the country for 60 years. The glory days of King David were long over. So, that helps us put Simeon and Anna in perspective. They knew about oppression and exploitation and dashed hopes. When they looked around their country, they knew that all was not well. And, if you remember that Luke wrote this Gospel, probably around the year 80, all was not well then, either, because, following a revolt by the Jewish Zealots, Rome had come in and completely destroyed the Temple, in the year 70. So waiting and hoping in the midst of suffering.

I don't think we do waiting and hoping very well. Do you remember the story of the family road trip when the little boy in the back kept asking "are we there yet?" And finally, the parents said, NO MORE. And he replied by saying I just have one more question: Will I be alive when we get there?

So, Simeon and Anna. They belonged to a group of people called "the quiet in the land," a group that was waiting and praying that the Messiah would come. As the text says, Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. So, both of them, praying and longing for that day. I'd interject here that that kind of longing was expressed in the psalm that we chanted. That looking forward, that trust. And Luke tells this part of the Gospel as a narrative about God breaking in and doing surprising things: there's the story earlier about Zechariah and Anna. Zechariah is too old for children and she's barren but suddenly they have a child on the way. And there's Mary who is told she's to bear a son in spite of her virginity. There's the story of the birth itself, with its own surprises: a stable, not a palace, shepherds rather than courtiers in

attendance, choirs of angels. God breaking in and doing surprising things. So, one more surprising thing for Simeon and Anna - this child, who Simeon recognizes as the Messiah. Now I can die in peace he says, in that beautiful prayer which has been prayed ever since. And if we look at that prayer more closely, we hear a powerful message: that God has prepared this salvation as a light for all the world and that Israel's glory will be in showing that light to all the nations. Simeon goes on, though, to say that this child's life won't be easy. Because he will speak the truth of God, some will hear and love him and some will reject and hate him. But all will have to choose whether to walk in God's way or not.

That last statement, that all will have to choose, is as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. But I think it's possible to read these scriptures and think: well, the past is like a different country, they do things differently there – especially around the ideas of sacrifice and purification. But I'd like us to think once more about Simeon and Anna and their waiting, hoping and trusting that the Messiah, we might say the Kingdom, will indeed come. As I mentioned, they were living in a trying, and difficult time. And, even after they recognized the child as the Messiah, things didn't change. It would have been easy for them to say, OK, the Messiah has arrived, YES, BUT, if that's the case, why the continued suffering?

Have you ever heard anyone talk about that YES BUT problem in which there are two clauses? The first one is positive, but the second, the one that starts with BUT, negates everything in the first part of the sentence. Like, YES, that's a great idea, BUT there's no time for it right now. Or YES, great outfit, BUT do you really think it's appropriate for the office? You get the idea. What Simeon and Anna and all of us who continue to live in a kingdom that hasn't fully arrived, are being asked to do is to say not yes BUT, but YES AND. Yes, that's a great idea AND let's talk about it. YES, things are a mess, we're surrounded by greed and lying and hypocrisy, AND what can we do about it?

And there's one more tie-in I'd like to make here. If we had read the scriptures for the Sunday, they would have included the Beatitudes from Matthew's Gospel. Blessed are you, Jesus says, if you mourn or if you

hunger and thirst for righteousness. We tend to read that mourning as mourning for individual loss, but actually it has more to do with mourning the fact that like Simeon and Anna, we can look at our world and see how far we seem to be from the Kingdom. And we mourn that fact because we hunger and thirst for the justice and righteousness that the full flowering of the kingdom will bring. So, relevant today, speaking directly to us: what is it you long for? And if it's the kingdom to which you are saying YES, put an AND after that yes and do what's needed to review and reshape your values, to renounce the greed and pride and selfishness you may still be carrying around, and accept the kind of life that's marked by the loving service of the Kingdom. Amen.