

The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Candlemas)

3 February 2019

Mal.3.1-4, Ps.84, Heb.2.14-18, Luke 2.22-40

St. Luke's Episcopal Church

North Little Rock, Arkansas

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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. Amen.

-Nunc dimittis, The Book of Common Prayer p.106

Today we celebrate a feast in the Church called "Candlemas," and although it that might be lesser known it is highly significant nonetheless. As we follow the Church Year this feast brings us to look upon a forty-day old Jesus who in obedience to the law of Moses has been brought to the temple to be offered up to God as Mary and Joseph's first-born son. Mary's presence at the temple was also in obedience to the purification rites prescribed by the law for all women who have given birth. They were to offer two turtle doves as was the prescribed sacrifice and were to be given by those who were poor.

We are at a pivotal point where we are able to look back at Christmas and begin looking forward to Lent and Easter but before we go, we pause to experience and take in this important scene at the temple. In the Christmas story we see that only a handful of people saw Jesus for who he really was, Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men. At Candlemas this small circle grows by two more souls. We encounter a devout and righteous older man by the name of Simeon which in

Hebrew means “*to listen*” and he had definitely been listening to the voice and leading of the Holy Spirit who had led him to go to the temple that day. He had come to believe that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah – the one who would deliver Israel and all the nations from the grip of all evil and worldly powers.

Simeon had a divine discontent with the status quo, and had a great longing to see the fulfillment of prophecy that all Israel would be saved and delivered from all tyranny and sin. The minute he laid eyes on Jesus he knew that he was the one he had been waiting for! He comes over to the Holy Family and takes Jesus into his arms and rejoices with words that have become one of the great songs of the Church “The Song of Simeon – in Latin, the *Nunc dimittis*.” Simeon also makes a prophecy himself that pointed away from the cradle and forward to the cross when he said to Mary: “*and a sword will pierce your own soul too!*” He knew that bringing about the salvation of the world not be easy but painful for Jesus and for Mary, his mother.

We still have one more person to meet at Candlemas, Anna, whose name in Hebrew means “grace and favor.” Like many of us, she had a grand plan for her life that included marriage, children and a long life. She managed to get two out of three - a 7-year marriage and a long life. However, her dreams were cut short when her husband died after only seven years of marriage and they had not had any children.

After being widowed, Anna cast herself on the Lord and her life went in a totally different direction.

She was granted the rare distinction in the biblical narrative of being known as a “prophetess” a female prophet. She stayed in the temple night and day, where she fasted and prayed. Because of her closeness to God she was granted the privilege of seeing Jesus, the messiah, with her own eyes. She began praising God and proclaiming the ancient prophecies that Jesus was to fulfill!

Here we have two more admitted to the inner circle of those who saw Jesus for who he really was. Two retired Senior adults joined an elite group of the faithful who had no standing in the worldly sense but to God they were precious and their faith was great and they saw what only a few were granted to behold.

What might we have in common with Simeon and Anna that would qualify us to see Jesus in our own day? Poet David Whyte points toward a possible answer – longing. He writes: “*Longing is divine discontent, the unendurable present finding a physical doorway to awe and discovery that frightens and emboldens, humiliates and beckons, makes us*

into pilgrim souls and sets us on the road...making us willing to give up our perfect house, our paid for home and our accumulated belongings.”¹

The liturgy for today, like all liturgy has an important role for the people who are present to play. As we have stood with our blessed candles, lit and held up to illuminate our way into the darkness of the unendurable present and fueled by our divine discontent we are reminded that this story of salvation is ongoing – like a chemical reaction that has set in motion and ever-expanding circle that encompasses more and more of humanity until the knowledge of the Lord will cover the earth as the waters cover the seas.

What started as a spark in the stable at Bethlehem has become the Light that illumines the whole world and that we are called and invited into this circle of fellowship with Jesus, the Messiah, to celebrate the salvation brought to the entire world by the Light of the world and to be bearers of that light that the darkness can never overcome. Amen!

¹ Whyte, David, *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning* (Many Rivers Press: Langley, WA, 2015) p.135