

The Rev. Frank F. Wilson
St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
Calhoun, GA

The Presentation: Malachi 3:1-4, Hebrews 2:14-18, Psalm 84 or 24:7-10, Luke 2:22-40

Title: The Presentation

Our Gospel text this morning from the Gospel of Luke, as well as the ones accompanying this story, are ones that rarely have come up in the three-year cycle on a Sunday. In fact, I have no memory of ever having preached on this particular text.

Anyway, this is a text which describes the moment in time when the young baby Jesus, now forty days old, is taken to the Temple for the rite called The Presentation to the Lord.

The way this story is given us in Luke we find that two rites that are prescribed in various places in Torah have been combined into one event. One is the Presentation to the Lord and the other the ritual purification that is required of the mother who has recently given birth – a thing which we thankfully do not find necessary today. And so for our purposes this morning we engage this text from the perspective of the Presentation.

First, let's get oriented here a little bit. This practice, this ritual, or rite if you will, is not to be confused with the circumcision which is required when the baby is but eight days old. Nor is this baptism, though it does share some theological underpinnings with it. The Presentation is that moment in time when the child is officially initiated into the Jewish community.

So, that's the setting for this story.

For Joseph and Mary, this would have been a glorious day – a day to have looked forward to. As faithful Jews this was a day of great joy and not to be missed for just about any reason. This is a very important day in the life of Jesus and his family.

But with that said, I want to suggest that neither Joseph nor Mary is the primary character in this story. Arguably, it is not even Jesus. I want to make the case that the main characters in this drama, in this scene from the life of Jesus, are one Simeon as well as the prophetess Anna. They are key for it is they who have assumed the role of

announcing and proclaiming the importance of this child. It is Simeon and Anna who we find proclaiming that the adult Jesus will one day soon change the trajectory of history. By way of this story Simeon and Anna join a small but expanding chorus of those who recognize and present to us and to the world this Wonderful One who will call us to a new and different way of being – a new and different way to be in relationship with God and with one another.

You may recall that first on the scene of Jesus' life was a heavenly chorus singing Glory to God in the highest. Their audience was some shepherds who were attending their sheep in a field somewhere near Bethlehem – the sight of Jesus' birth. And the angels sang of the potential for peace on earth. And then it was the shepherds themselves who said, "Let us go see this thing that the Lord has made known to us."

Later it will be wise men from the east who will proclaim Jesus, but for now, in this moment it is one Simeon and one Anna who are moved by the Holy Spirit to proclaim to all within earshot that this Jesus is to play a special and unique role in human history. And Simeon proclaims that this child is to be the embodiment of and the means of salvation – not only to the people Israel, but to the whole world. Now I don't know of a pronouncement that could be more important; more amazing than that.

And because of our place in history we all know the rest of the story.

Jesus will show up one day twelve years later. And he finds his way into the Temple and he begins to instruct the instructors.

And on another afternoon about 18 years later we know that Jesus will find his way down to the River Jordan where his cousin, John, is baptizing and proclaiming and contrasting the difference between a righteous one and a hypocrite; between those who hear the word and do their best to live into it versus those who wink at the word and go on doing pretty much whatever suits them. And through a series of examples that describe a life that God is calling us to – a life marked by generosity and compassion, John, in effect is saying 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Do that. Live that. And God will be well pleased.'

John says and does these things. Then he points to and proclaims Jesus to be the one; the Lamb of God; the One whose sandals he is not worthy to tie. And then John

retires, exits the scene and Jesus begins his ministry, begins to fulfill his purpose in earnest.

And, again, we really do know the rest of the story.

One day Jesus makes a stage out of the side of a hill and he tells his listeners that God desires that they hunger and thirst for righteousness which is but another way of saying that God desires that we make friends with; lean into our better angels and that we give short shrift to any impulse or person who would distract us from that life.

And Jesus says be merciful which is but another way of saying, extend mercy to others as you would have others extend mercy to you.

And Jesus says have a pure heart for a cold heart leads to a kind of death.

And Jesus says be not about the business of making mischief; rather be about being a peacemaker.

Jesus said all this and more one afternoon on a hillside. And Biblical scholars tell us that this is the very early Jesus. This is the Jesus of the earliest Gospels. And some have pointed out that in that sermon that afternoon Jesus had nothing whatsoever to say about what we are to believe but had a lot to say about who we are to be – how we are to think, and act, and be in community with one another. In other words Jesus had a lot to say about how we are to live.

And on another occasion, Jesus reminds us that we are fools if we do not appreciate and stand in some awe of God's creation. Jesus says, look at the birds of the air – they don't sow, they don't reap, and neither do they gather, yet they thrive and they fill the air with beauty and effortless motion. They live in a world of abundance and so do you – and you had nothing to do with creating any of it. It is all a gift from God. It is all part of the Great Mystery. And we should all be in awe of it all.

And Jesus will say, look at the lilies of the field, how beautiful and well-dressed they are and yet they neither toil nor spin. And if God will clothe a lily in such finery, will God not so clothe you?

Jesus, in effect says you do well to be in some awe of that which God displays all around you. Air to breath, food to eat, beauty to behold and to be blessed by. Jesus is saying, you can take this island home for granted, you can even abuse it and its fruits if

you choose, but you do so at your own peril for your reward will be a suffering soul a much abused planet with a much diminished ability to nurture and support life..

Dear ones, one afternoon some 2000 or so years ago, one Joseph and Mary come to church to present their son to the Lord. One Simeon, whose heart and mind had been touched by the Holy Spirit, was present to be a witness and to be a declarer of this Jesus who, like all the prophets before him, would dare to speak for God. But this one is different. This Jesus will speak of a new way of being, and he will speak of a new way of understanding, and he will speak with a heretofore unknown authority.

Simeon and Anna are important players among the cast of persons who are called to be proclaimers of Jesus' special purpose and the bearer of the message we now call the Good News. The best news. The news that God has created a world where with a little wisdom, and a little patience, and all working together, all the while leaning into our better angels we can come to know salvation. In fact, in this sense of coming to love who and what Jesus loved we have a role to play in our own salvation and to be co-creators of it.

But in the meantime, Simeon and Anna, speak a message that, in its essence, is very much akin to the words spoken by God Gods self as Jesus was transfigured on a mountain top, and God says, "This is my Son, the beloved." And God adds this injunction along with Simeon and Anna and all the prophets who have ever lived. God's final words that day are words that still resonate through time and space. The final words that day were these. And God says, 'Listen to Him.'

Amen.