

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Feast of the Presentation; 2 February 2020
St. Thomas', Glassboro – Todd Foster
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Almighty and everliving God, we humbly pray that, as your only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple, so we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts by Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Malachi 3:1-4, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40, Psalm 84

1 The Presentation of our Lord

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord at the Temple. You may not have celebrated this Feast much. Unlike All Saints', it doesn't get moved to a Sunday. Unlike Christmas, it's often overlooked when it occurs on a weekday. But unlike so many other observances, it takes precedence of a Sunday, so when 2 February happens to fall on a Sunday, *The Presentation* is what we celebrate.

The catechism's definition of a sacrament is an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual reality. Like so many aspects of our faith, the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple carries a lot more freight than what first meets the eye. Jesus' parents are participating in a rite that, while full of meaning for them, they're sure their actions will go unnoticed and unremarked by anyone else. Yet the surprising response they receive is an indicator of the deeper significance of their actions and the eternal stage upon which Mary and Joseph are enacting their faith.

2 Fulfilling the Torah

Mary and Joseph are enacting their faith: they go to the Temple in order to fulfill the Law of God, which is to say, the Torah.

Let's start with a brief note about the Torah. When we use the term "Law" in a Judeo-Christian context, we are very often talking specifically about the Torah. The Torah is the five books of Moses, the first five books of the Bible. Torah is the body of instruction contained in those five books. Torah might also refer to a wider body of knowledge and practice built around those five books. What Torah is not is an arbitrary set of regulations set forth by a disciplinarian god who has set out to test people to see if they're worth caring for. What Torah is not is a burden meant to make life hard and to which only the most committed will give themselves and become martyrs to their religious practice. What Torah is not is a stairway to heaven that must be climbed laboriously, step by step, until a particular goal is finally achieved.

Instead, Torah is the story of God's love for God's people. And by "God's people" I mean every human being, since all were created by God in the image of God. Torah is the story of God's redemption of God's people. Torah is the story of God's patience, and the lengths to which God will go to do good to God's people. Torah is an explanation of the true contours of the world in which we live, instruction in how to live well and with joy. Torah is the *original* set of descriptions and understandings about how the world works, how it was created, and how we might live within it in the tranquility and joy represented by the Garden of Eden, also called paradise.

The call of Torah in this case is for the sacrifice of a lamb, but Mary and Joseph can only afford two pigeons. So this young family, in their poverty, makes a sacrifice that is more symbolic than substantive, representing something that is out of their reach but which they still value and hold dear. In their poverty, Mary and Joseph celebrate a ritual of abundance, the meager flesh of a pigeon standing in for the lamb just as we use small pieces of bread and a sip of wine to stand in for the great feast

of salvation that someday we will experience in full.

The Jewish Torah is not exactly the same as, but is highly analogous to, the Christian Gospel. They are both Good News. They are both invitations to life. They both lead one into certain ways of living and relating to God, to one another, to our very selves, to the entire world. Ways which reflect the nature of God, which is our own true nature. Ways of well-being and wholeness, ways of peace and caring, ways that honor God and all God's creation.

Mary and Joseph go to the Temple in order to fulfill the Law, to carry out the practices of the Torah, because they know that God has hidden life within those simple practices of worship, like leaven hidden in bread.

3 God Enters the Temple

But what happens as Mary and Joseph take their simple, common steps of obedience? Our lectionary connects the rite to the words of the prophet Malachi, "And suddenly the Lord whom you seek will come to his Temple."

When Moses erected the Tabernacle, and later Solomon built the Temple, the Bible tells us the glory of God, the presence of God, filled those places as with smoke, so that nobody could enter them and everyone could know that God was there. Even after the smoke cleared, the Most Holy Place in the Temple, the place where the ark of God sat, was only entered once per year, and then only by a priest, and then only with copious amounts of smokey incense to shield the priest's eyes, lest he inadvertently gaze upon the presence of God.

But in first century Palestine, amid all the wars and destruction and controversy, the Ark of God's presence had been lost and smoke no longer filled the Temple. Solomon's Temple having long been destroyed, the new Temple was built by an imposter-king. For many believers this new Temple was sterile, corrupt, and God was absent from it.

Then, suddenly: the son of Mary and Joseph is brought into the Temple precincts. God enters the Temple in a whole new way, not in smoke and fire and displays of power – but as a newborn baby. The prophecy is fulfilled, but in a most unexpected way! It is not prodigious sacrifices on a high holy day that bring God into the Temple. It is not theological sophistication or expertise in the finer points of doctrine, dogma, and liturgical practice. Instead it is Mary and Joseph, fulfilling a humble rite, who show up to pray and to consecrate the life of their little child to God. This is what occasions God's return to God's Temple.

And God's return is marked not by thunder and lightning, great signs and wonders, but instead by a gentle song of joy and blessing sung by the senior Simeon. God's return is expressed in the loving words of prophetic praise and wild gratitude uttered by the aged Anna.

4 Celebrating the Presentation

It is good for us to celebrate major feasts of the church: the feasts everyone knows like Christmas and Easter. It is good for us to use fancy clothes and incense, to smoke up the place and to remind ourselves that God is other, God is mighty, God is mysterious.

But it is also and equally good for us to follow the examples of Mary and Joseph, fulfilling the little invitations. Morning Prayer. Grace said over a family meal. The contemplation of a sunset. Or the Feast of the Presentation. In each of these observances we set aside space for God in our lives. We offer to God the first-fruits of our time and attention. We celebrate a ritual of abundance in the midst of our poverty. We respond to God's invitation.

It is precisely in these spaces that we create, or rather spaces in our lives we refrain from filling up with other things, that God speaks to us. In a song, in a gentle word from an elderly friend. And in the Passover liberation that lies quietly underneath it all.

In the Torah, in the Gospel, in the Bible, in the Church, in your Baptism, in the Eucharist: God calls out with a cascade of overtures, inviting you to hear God's voice. You don't have to make the first move: God has made the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh moves. God's love for you is proclaimed from the mountaintops and it shines out from the flame of a single candle. As when Mary and Joseph entered the Temple to present the sacrifices prescribed for their firstborn son, Jesus, God awaits your consent offered anew in worship and intention every day so that God might make God's self known to you and God's redemptive love ever more powerfully operative in your life.

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