

Sunday, February 2, 2025

Presentation of Our Lord

Luke 2.22-40

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/2921804248027111>

(Sermon begins at about 20:15)

“Presentation of Our Lord and of Ourselves”

Today we have the joy of celebrating a feast day that, while occurring every year, only falls on a Sunday once every six years. An occasion when we interrupt our regular course of Epiphany readings to focus on a very special event in our communal life. Although, even then, by the sheer nature of the day and what it symbolizes, even this special day is, in itself, an Epiphany story: a story of manifestation, of revelation. Yes, today we celebrate the Feast of St. Phil of Punxsutawney. Also known as Groundhog Day.

Now, of course I’m being facetious—I know, such a shock. While today is Groundhog Day for secular society, in the Church February 2nd is the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. Occurring forty days after Christmas, this is the celebration of what used to be referred to as the Purification of Mary. Under Mosaic law, a woman giving birth to a male child is considered ritually unclean for a period of forty days. During this time, she is barred from touching anything holy or from entering a house of worship. On the day of her purification, she must present herself to a priest to make atonement on her behalf, offering a sacrifice of a lamb, a pair of pigeons, or a pair of turtledoves, depending on financial means. Only then shall she be considered ritually clean once more.

Following Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph have remained in the vicinity of Bethlehem, a mere six miles from Jerusalem. Being so close, Mary apparently decides to perform her rite of purification at the Temple in Jerusalem. What should be a routine rite of purification turns into a major event. Upon entering the Temple, the Holy Family encounters Simeon who, by revelation from the Holy Spirit, immediately recognizes the child as being the long-awaited Messiah. Declaring in his song of praise:

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.

Simeon draws on language from the Prophet Isaiah regarding the restoration of Israel following the Babylonian Exile. Only here, offering a song of praise for the One who would bring about another restoration. Restoration of right relationship with God. The One who through his life and ministry, through his death and resurrection, would bring salvation. “Salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples.” Not just salvation and a return to glory for the

people of Israel, but rather a universal salvation that would include Gentiles, as well. The prophetic statement by Simeon being echoed by another: the prophet Anna, who has fervently been waiting for the “redemption of Jerusalem.”

The witness of these two wise prophets proving to be another means of Epiphany, of revelation of who Jesus is as the Messiah for all people. And in making their witness, turning what was meant to be a quiet family celebration of Mary’s rite of purification into a public presentation of Jesus in the house of God, as the Son of God, as the One who would be the means of salvation for all humanity.

These two prophets, advanced in years, steeped in their faith and in the Scriptures, fervent in their hope for God’s redemption for their people and for all humanity, are able to recognize through eyes of faith a deeper truth about this child before them. A truth that transcends time and faith traditions. A truth for which they had been waiting their entire lives. A truth that, for Simeon, continually drew him to the Temple, to God’s house. A truth that, for Anna, prompted her to remain permanently in the Temple. Both prompted by the desire to be present to God, to know God more fully, to feel God’s presence in their lives more deeply. Both presenting themselves in the Temple, in profound faith and with fervent desires that, before they died, they might see the Messiah for themselves. Continually presenting themselves in the Temple so that when God’s Messiah was himself presented, they would be able to serve as witnesses. To witness the event of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, and to witness to their Spirit-inspired understanding what the Messiah would accomplish for all humanity.

Therefore, as we celebrate the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, we also honor the presentation of Anna and Simeon in the Temple as witnesses in a number of ways. Witnesses to the presentation of Jesus. Witnesses to their own faith. Witnesses to God’s salvation manifest through his Son. Their witness serves as an icon for us in our own lives of faith. Just as Jesus was presented in the Temple, just as Anna and Simeon had presented themselves in the Temple, so too do we present ourselves in the Temple, or our version of it, week after week.

Just as in that Temple in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, some of what happens in this place is fairly ordinary. In the Temple, the Holy Family went for an ordinary rite of purification. Yet, it was transfigured into something extraordinary through their encounters with Anna and Simeon. Through the extraordinary gift of them sharing their prophetic witness of who this child was for them and for the world. Likewise, when we present ourselves in God’s temple, our intent is often fairly ordinary. To participate in the liturgy, to hear the word of God proclaimed, to say the prescribed prayers, to partake of a ritual meal. Yet, if we truly enter those doors with the attitude not of just “coming to church,” but rather with the intention that we are presenting ourselves to God, our worship experience is transformed from the ordinary into something extraordinary.

In presenting ourselves to God, we are in turn presented with the sacred mysteries that Simeon and Anna experienced in their own lives of faith. We are given the opportunity to participate in ancient rites that span millennia—connecting us with our ancestors in the faith, not just to the first century Church, but even farther back to the foundations of the Jewish tradition and the ritual practices ordained by God as the people wandered in the wilderness, seeking their true

home. Their rites and rituals being the foundation for our own. Rites and rituals which similarly point us to our true home. Rites and rituals that provide glimpses into the truth and the promises of the One first presented in the Temple. The truth and the promises longed for and witnessed to by Anna and Simeon.

In presenting ourselves to God in this place, we are given the opportunity to hear the words of ancient, sacred texts, which reveal the mysteries of God and God's Creation. We are given the opportunity to hear the wisdom of the prophets speaking to us—not just ancient words about times long past, but words that continue to be relevant to our own lives of faith, if we but listen with the ears of faith. Words that reveal the truth of the One first presented in the Temple. Words that will guide us in our lives of faith, just as those same words guided Anna and Simeon in their lives of faith.

In presenting ourselves to God in this place, we are given the opportunity to participate in prayers that are not just some words on a page but are our direct communication with God. Words that lift our most fervent desires, our joys and our sorrows, to a God who is open to hearing what we have to say. Our opportunity to respond to God after hearing his words to us. And these prayers are not just ours, but are the words of the faithful worldwide, lifted in unison. An expression of our solidarity with our siblings around the globe. All united in faith, in thanksgiving, in hope, for the fulfillment of the promises of the One first presented in the Temple. Prayers of praise, echoing those of Anna and Simeon.

In presenting ourselves to God in this place, we are given the opportunity to participate in a ritual meal of Eucharist, of Thanksgiving. A ritual meal comprised of ordinary bread and ordinary wine. And yet, through the mysteries of the Eucharistic Prayer and the work of the Holy Spirit, these elements becoming the Body and Blood of Christ. A ritual act in which the Real Presence of Christ is manifest in this place. The Eucharist, in which we eat bits of bread and take sips of wine, but through the mystery of the Eucharist becoming an opportunity to share in a heavenly banquet with all the faithful, here and around the world, now and across the span of salvation history. A foretaste of the heavenly banquet we will all share in the fullness of time. A banquet of thanksgiving in celebration of the universal salvation achieved through the One first presented in the Temple. A meal nourishing us for the work of being witnesses to Christ, as were Anna and Simeon.

This and so much more is what happens when we don't just "come to church" but when we present ourselves to God as we enter into his temple that is St. Gregory's Parish.

Today also happens to be our Parish Annual Meeting. An opportunity to celebrate our communal life and the ministries we undertake in the name of Jesus Christ—ministries that reflect who we are as the Body of Christ. I can't think of a better day on which to have our Annual Meeting than on the Feast of the Presentation. Because, just as Jesus was presented in the Temple for the sacred work he would perform in his life, we present ourselves in this place not just for worship but also to engage in the sacred work that we do as Christ's Body in the world.

As we engage in the work that we are called to do, and as we come to this place week after week to be fed and nurtured for that work, I invite all of us to rethink what we are doing. That we are not just “going to church.” We are not just doing such-and-such ministry. Rather, every time we come to this place, for worship, to engage in ministry, to share in fellowship and hospitality, we are presenting ourselves to God, to Christ, and to one another, here in his temple. Presenting ourselves to witness to his love and to the hope and promise of salvation through our own worship and ministry experiences.