

Sermon February 4, 2018 Presentation: The Song of Simeon  
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The event we are celebrating today is one of the very oldest Christian festivals in our liturgical calendar. A brief Google search this week turned up the full text of a sermon by Methodius of Patara given on this day in the year 312 BCE. So this Festival is very ancient. If we were to discover — or dig up — an artifact that could be proven conclusively to be more than 1700 years old there is no doubt that we would all consider it to be of great value, almost no matter what it was. Such an artifact would likely have some sort of aura about it, awakening in us an experience of awe because of the glimpse it would provide not only into the culture and economy of a earlier, ancient time, but also perhaps a glimpse into the mystery of our own origins — another clue in our eternal search for answers to the question, “Who are we?”

The same, and more, is true of intellectual property — like sermons which have survived since the 4th Century — and of ancient worship festivals like the one we're celebrating today. They locate us, ground us, and connect us with fellow believers throughout the centuries and on into the future.

Today's festival goes by a number of different names. The Feast of the Purification; Candlemas; The Feast of Meeting; The Feast of the Presentation Of Our Lord In The Temple.

It celebrates the fact that Mary and Joseph were devout in their faith and kept the law spelled out in the Book of Leviticus which required that Mary not enter the Temple in Jerusalem until 40 days after she gave birth. That 40th day is today (or actually February 2nd but we're celebrating it today). If you happen to have one of these black NRSV Bibles in your pew rack you can turn to page 86 and see there in the 12th Chapter of Leviticus that same law spelled out. The reasons which, in the ancient world, called for this extended period of purification have to do with the blood involved in the birth process.

Through sacrificial self-offering on the Cross, the Jesus who comes to the Temple today as an infant will, in adulthood, bring about revolutionary change, transforming the real blood of Temple sacrifice - that of actual lambs and turtledoves - to the wine and bread of the Eucharist, His own body and blood. It is a transformation so deep, so pregnant with meaning, in so many directions, it is almost impossible to fully express it in words. It is certainly beyond the scope of a single sermon. Something much more vivid and visceral is needed. For many of us, myself included, a life time of getting up from my pew and walking forward to the communion rail to receive in our mouths and on our tongues the bread and the wine (the body and blood of Jesus!) have conveyed that meaning to me in ways that are beyond the verbal. In a way my body understands it now better than my brain ever could, it remembers calmly when my brain is overwhelmed. I'm convinced that Jesus understood all of this fully, and ahead of time. It is often noticed that He spoke in parables. It is perhaps more than

equally true that He also speaks to us — still, today, here at St. Helen's — in sacraments.

This is the change that Simeon announces today. This is what, in prophetic vision, he sees in the infant Jesus and this is what he sings. As a creative artist I find myself attributing to Simeon something which I sometimes experience myself — that songs sometimes arrive unbidden and that sometimes they are needed in order to move things forward. [Perhaps you will hear some of that in the 'Song of Simeon' which concludes this sermon, sung by Dale and the Choir. In a sense Simeon is from ancient time the soloist and we, among the untold multitudes of Christians who have sung it after him, are the choir.

Simeon's song is about release. The vision he receives about Jesus is that through Him, he (Simeon) will be released from service — in the literal language of the Greek, that he will be literally no longer a slave. Having been held captive in slavery He will be allowed to depart in peace. He sees now that this has been the promise of God since the most ancient prophecies of the Bible, that the Messiah will be a breaker of chains: 'Lord lettest thou thy servant [thy slave] depart in peace, according to thy word.'

He sings because he is moved by a vision, long awaited, long in coming. Moved because of the freedom which is at the heart of the vision, moved that is *his* eyes which are seeing the vision — my hope is that *our* eyes will see some of that vision today — and moved

because he *is seeing* that God's salvation is for *all* people, *and* that this vision can no longer be hidden for it is 'before the face of *all* people.'

Simeon's song is about light. That is the metaphor that springs from Simeon's prophetic imagination, that Jesus will be 'a light, to lighten the Gentiles.' In musical settings of the Song of Simeon there is often a quickening of the tempo, and intensification of the harmony, or a leap to higher notes – or all three – as those words are sung. In my imagination, that quickening is propelled by Simeon's vision, that he himself is *seeing* the Light which is Jesus Christ, a light he has longed all his life to see, and today is seeing for the first time *in the now*. It's a light I want us all to see. It is the light of all the nations, *and* the glory of Israel. It's not the nations *instead* of Israel, it's the light of the nations *and* the glory of the people of Israel.

'And' is such a beautiful word in that context and there's a lot of it in the vision and the song of Simeon.

Among the most important 'ands' of this story is in the phrase '*and* Anna.' Simeon does not prophesy alone. As is so often the case in Luke, the presence, the ministry, the leadership, and the prophecy of women is equally important to those of men. Luke is fastidious about this. It's throughout his gospel: Elizabeth, Mary, Anna, Martha and Mary of Bethany, the Woman with the Alabaster Jar, women as first witnesses to the empty tomb, and more.

So we need to hear Anna's voice along with Simeon's today. Where Simeon is described only as 'righteous and devout,' Anna is described as fully 'a prophet' who "never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to *all* who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

There are undoubtedly those who understand the law expressed in the Book of Leviticus better than I, but to my reading, it sets out *different* standards for men and women. For example the time required for a woman's purification after giving birth to a girl is 80 days instead of 40, twice as long as that required after the birth of boy. Yet in Luke's vision men and women are equal. It is clear that this is among the heaviest of the chains that Jesus intends to break, the ancient rivalry between men and women. Sometimes we think that this equality is a new vision in our time. Although we are taking a *long* time about fulfilling it, it's clear that this is the vision of Luke's Jesus from the beginning.