*The Ordinary Resumption after the Grand Intrusion*

A sermon preached at LPCC on December 31, 2017

Luke 2: 22 – 40

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Today is one of the Sundays on the year which is often referred to as a *Low* Sunday, not unlike the Sunday after Easter. We can perhaps read into this term anything we want, but after all the anticipation and frenetic activity associated with the seasons of Advent and Christmas, then comes a low point or a feeling within us as to how we will transition back to the ordinary routines of our lives. We find ourselves still in the Christmas season and as such our worship has again featured some carol singing. Soon we will move from the focus of the Christ Child to the Feast of Epiphany, the next season of the Church year. Epiphany commences on the twelfth day of Christmas, that is January 6th. In the Orthodox Church it commemorates the baptism of Jesus, and in the Western Church it commemorates the manifestation of Jesus to the Magi (i.e. the Gentiles), commonly referred to as *The Three Kings* or *The Three Wise Men.* As a matter of interest Scripture doesn’t provide a number but given the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, it has been assumed that there were three persons who visited Jesus. We also know that despite the appearance of these persons in the nativity scene, the visit took place much later, possibly up to two years, to another location where only Jesus and his mother were present. Well it is not my intention to enter the season of Epiphany prematurely other than to say it is a season which sometimes gets lost in the aftermath of Christmas.

For some of us, the conclusion of the Advent and Christmas seasons can be a difficult time. We have experienced a month of expectation, of celebration, and the sharing of *good tidings of joy*. We have illuminated our homes and our Christmas trees with a sea of lights. We have welcomed home our families and friends, or conversely have visited them, and our time has been consumed with a multitude of preparations … making sure that everything turns out as planned and hoped for. The difficulty lies in the fact that all of this has removed us from the ordinary day-to-day repetitive activities and demands of our lives. After the New Year’s Day holiday tomorrow or soon thereafter we must return to the ordinary, our daily schedules, and the accompanying responsibilities.

These were the thoughts which occupied my mind in these concluding days of Christmas. I wondered how I might in some way this morning relate to what space, what set of personal circumstances, you as a congregation might be experiencing. Would you be able to identify with this post-Christmas *let down* and be able to face the resumption of the *ordinary* which, as we all know, consists of the majority of our living, our doing and our being?

One of my favourite authors is William Willimon who is a renowned biblical scholar and preacher. Willimon is a United Methodist Bishop and a former Dean of the Chapel of Duke University. He has the ability to capture the realities with which you and I deal against the backdrop of our faith. He manages to summarize the feelings associated with this post Christmas Sunday in seven words …he refers to it as *The Ordinary Resumption after the Grand Intrusion.* Hence my sermon title. Let me quote a few of his observations which might resonate with you and explain his statement:

“The Christmas Eve service was, as usual, quite grand. There were candles, choirs, carols and crowds. But that was Christmas Eve, the time of great expectation, and this is the Sunday *after* Christmas, the time of great dissipation. Yes, we are still singing Christmas carols and the decorations are still beautiful, but nothing beats the expectancy, excitement, and anticipation of *before* Christmas. Now is the season of crumpled wrapping paper, overstuffed trashcans, and line-ups at the return counters*.* For most of us there is one more day to celebrate, the birth of a new year, and then the resumption of business as usual in the office, the plant, the hospital, the classroom, the shop, or for many of our LPCC family the independence of choice in a well-earned retirement (and let me add what is missing in Willimon’s list …that busiest place on the planet which is the home to be maintained and the children to care for!) Christmas, when the child is born in Bethlehem, is the *grand intrusion* of God into our lives, the great interruption with angels rending the skies. But today, the Sunday after Christmas, we’re on the verge of the great resumption.”

Today’s reading from the Gospel according to Luke describes how Jesus’ parents returned to the ordinary things of life. With the exception of thirty verses in Luke, scripture is silent on the early years of Jesus’ development. The author provides a glimpse of the normal events which took place in the life of a Jewish boy … his circumcision on the eighth day of his life, and a visit to the temple following the forty-day period of purification for his mother. At that time Jesus was consecrated to God and the sacrifice of two doves or pigeons were offered as required by law. The law made provision for those who could not afford a lamb to be sacrificed and stipulated that two doves or two pigeons would suffice. For Jesus a humble birth . . . a humble sacrifice . . . but whose significance was soon to be realized by two persons who happened to be in the Temple at the time of the consecration.

The remainder of the passage from the gospel reading is significant in that it records an incident where we see a deep faith in action. The two characters, Simeon and Anna are elderly. Simeon is a devout and righteous man and Anna, we are told, is a prophetess. It had been revealed to Simeon through the Holy Spirit that he would not die before having seen Jesus. He was moved by the Spirit to go to the temple at the same time that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus for consecration. It was at this moment that Simeon recognized Jesus as the long awaited King. He offered a prayer of praise to God, which has become known as the Prayer of Simeon: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation.” Let us pause for a moment to imagine what this meant to him. Simeon had remained faithful until that poignant moment of recognition.

Likewise Anna, who had been widowed at a very early age, maintained her faith for decades. She had known sorrow but had not grown bitter. Sorrow has the power to make us hard to the point that we can grow resentful towards God. On the other hand it can make us kinder and more empathetic. It can shake our faith or it can deepen our faith. Anna never ceased to hope. Sometimes age takes away the strength of our bodies, the functioning of our minds, and sometimes it can take away from our hopes. The difference lies in our relationship with God. If we think that God is distant and detached, we may well despair; but if we think of God as intimately connected to our lives, then the years and circumstances will never diminish our hope. What were the things that sustained Anna’s long and very ordinary life? She never ceased to worship and never ceased to pray. She spent her life in God’s house … in fact more precisely she spent it in the outer courts of the temple because women were not permitted in the inner sanctuary. Yet another example of systematic discrimination codified in scripture. Such exclusion is still much alive today in how some expressions of the Christian church rely on scripture to base their practices of limiting the participation of women in the church, not to mention the priesthood! Anna prayed constantly, keeping in contact with the One who was the source of her strength. We are told that in God’s strength our weakness is made perfect. For Simeon and Anna their waiting for Jesus was complete. Their faith had endured and they experienced wholeness in its fullest sense. I believe that for Simeon and Ana they had witnessed and felt deeply the authentic meaning of the One called Jesus. Perhaps in our own personal life of faith we too have had a similar moment of recognition.

Following the visit to the temple, Mary and Joseph returned with their child to Nazareth. Joseph to his carpenter’s shop and Mary to the task of caring for and nurturing the child Jesus. Life returned to normal after the dramatic events surrounding Jesus’ birth and the significant part which they played in those events. Like you and me, Mary and Joseph resumed the ordinary events of everyday life as mother, homemaker, father, and carpenter. The next twelve years would be no different, and if they were, we have no knowledge of those intervening years for Jesus or his parents.

And so we might ask the question which I asked myself this past week when beginning my thoughts for today’s service: “After all is said and done, what now?” What do we need to do in order that, to use William Willimon’s term, the *Grand intrusion* into our lives this Christmas may have a lasting affect in our ordinary times? The answer lies in part in those beautiful verses from the prologue to the Gospel according to John. Words which you have already heard during this season: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” Jesus came to be with us … the intrusion was of a permanent nature. We cannot pack away this event with the lights and the decorations until the next time. Jesus came, not just for a visit but to be with us. At the time of his birth we beheld his glory but in the ordinary times of our lives he remains a companion on the road of life. The historical Jesus never claimed or expected any of the adulation and accolades attributed to the Christ of faith. But one thing remains sure and unchangeable, that is Jesus taught us how to live and how to live abundantly. His authentic living, his code of ethics, his unconditional love for all people have inspired millions to follow his way.

We are counted among those who claim to be *Christians* or *followers of Jesus*. And so after all is said and done and the excitement and events of this season begin to lose their energy and we do likewise, we would do well to renew that vital relationship which necessarily goes beyond a seasonal acquaintance to a lifetime covenant. It is an adventure and a way of living which requires our utmost integrity and accountability. As we go from this place to continue the ordinary and necessary things of life and as we confront unexpected circumstances and turns in the road, let us be assured that God is with us, Emmanuel … we are not alone. AMEN