

The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple – February 2, 2014
Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84 or Psalm 24:7-10; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Today we celebrate the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple. This special day celebrated in various western traditions is also called Candlemas, and the Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin. In the Eastern Church it is called the Meeting of Christ with Simeon. Such a variety of names provides testimony to the wealth of spiritual meaning that many traditions have discovered in this brief incident. Our Episcopal/Anglican name for this, The Presentation, hearkens back to the Torah where in the Book of Exodusⁱ it states that every firstborn son had to be dedicated to God in memory of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, when the firstborn sons of the Egyptians died and those of Israel were spared.

This event of the Presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple provides one of the surprising bookends, as it were, to the whole Advent/Christmas/Epiphany story, coming near the end of it. The other bookend is the story at the beginning,ⁱⁱ of the visit of the angel to an elderly man, Zechariah. He was performing his priestly duties in the Temple when he was told that his wife, Elizabeth, who was past childbearing age, would conceive and bear a son, and that they were to name him John—John, who we know as John the Baptist, and who would become the herald, the preparer of the way for the Messiah who was also to come soon.

These passages—the angelic visit to Zechariah in the Temple, and today's reading of the Presentation of the infant Jesus in the Temple—are rarely assigned in our lectionary.ⁱⁱⁱ And that's too bad, because most of the other Advent, Christmas and Epiphany readings really don't surprise us very much anymore because they are read so often and are thus almost too familiar. In large part, we have programmed the element of surprise out of much of the way we celebrate the Advent, Christmas and Epiphany seasons. But wait!—today's gospel reading is different, and still offers us a few surprises, something unexpected.^{iv}

The first surprise is that God begins by talking with older people. In this story involving old Simeon and even older Anna in the Temple—as well as the story involving Zechariah and Elizabeth—older people are not written off or pushed to the margins. In fact, God makes them agents and spokespersons. God starts with the old folks, the elders.

The second surprise is that this new thing God is doing occurs in traditional settings and during old-fashioned events, as it were. The angelic visit to the aging priest Zechariah and the visit of the infant Messiah to the old holy man, Simeon, and to the elderly prophet, Anna—all take place during different ancient liturgical practices in the old Jerusalem Temple. This is equivalent today to an extraordinary visit by God at, say, a solemn Latin Mass, or at a 1662 or 1928 Prayer Book Morning Prayer service. As much as God may be present in new ways at a contemporary “post-modern,” or “emergent church,” or at a new “mega-church”—here we see a deep regard for more traditional

settings. By the time of the birth of Christ the Jerusalem Temple was becoming a less and less important religious institution.^v By 70 CE, The Temple and its ancient liturgies ceased to exist at all, after the Roman Tenth Legion destroyed the last of the three Temples that had been built on that site in Jerusalem over the previous 900 years. By the time of Jesus' birth the Third Temple^{vi} still stood and was used mostly as the site for the Observance of the annual Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur. It was also the site for those who practiced the old liturgical rites of incense offerings, as Zechariah did—or, who made burnt offerings of certain animals, as Mary and Joseph did when they offered up two turtledoves at the time they presented their infant son Jesus. The Temple was also the place where the leadership of rival Jewish religious and political factions claimed their headquarters—and was thus symbolic of their national identity—*until* the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. And so, our second surprise—God appears in traditional contexts—and it is there the unexpected occurs when the old priest Zechariah is doing his duty, and when old Simeon and then Anna pass through while Joseph and Mary are offering their sacrifice.

This leads to the third surprise—babies are on their way! That's surprising, even shocking, for someone like old Zechariah and Elizabeth who, like a somewhat younger Abraham and Sarah, were well past childbearing years—but surprise!—they were given the news that they would have a child. As well, the elders, Simeon and Anna, are not themselves beyond being surprised even if they thought they had seen it all. So also with a young virgin named Mary, and her betrothed, Joseph. The mystery and surprise of God fulfilling His promises and purpose grow in ever-widening circles and reveal that God's surprising work takes place in old age as well as youth; in barrenness or virginity; in traditional or in modern settings; in the center of the nation at the Jerusalem Temple or in marginal places like Bethlehem and Nazareth. And the encounters with these babies—John the Baptist in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth; and Jesus in our gospel story today—lead to some of the most beautiful praise and poetry in all the Bible: the Song of Zechariah, also known as “The Benedictus,” prophesying the powerful herald ministry to come of his son John; and the Song of Simeon, also known as the “Nunc Dimittis,” proclaiming the fulfillment of the messianic hopes of the people of Israel as old Simeon holds the infant Jesus in his arms.

Babies bring out the best! As Henri Nouwen put it, they bring out the fact that “life is precious. Not because it is unchangeable, like a diamond, but because it is vulnerable, like a little baby. To love life means to love its vulnerability, asking for care, attention, guidance and support. Life and death are connected by vulnerability. The newborn child and the dying elder both remind us of the preciousness of our lives.”^{vii} This was certainly played out in an experience I had with my then ten-day old daughter 35 years ago. At that time, I was the chaplain of a long-term care facility outside of Washington, D.C. The staff there had planned a baby shower ahead of the birth of our first child. However, Megan delivered baby Frances three weeks ahead of the shower date. With baby in arms, we and the staff decided to go ahead with the shower, with infant Frances as guest of honor. It was a wonderful celebration. As part of the festivities, we walked around the different units of this large nursing home, greeting residents and staff with little Frances in my arms. We entered one of the locked units—known as the Memory

Unit—where many people with Alzheimer’s or other sorts of dementia resided. We walked by a woman sitting in her wheelchair out in the hallway who stared blankly at nothing in particular. For some reason, I decided to place our baby in her lap. Well, she looked down at little Frances and started to talk both to her and with Megan. I then picked up Frances and walked on. As I did, I passed by the nurses’ station on that unit and shared this incident with the Head Nurse. The nurse looked surprised and then said to me, “She hasn’t spoken to anyone in more than two years!” Babies bring out the best in us.

Now finally, of course, as we all know, babies don’t bring out the best in everyone—whether it was Herod who tried to track down and kill the infant Jesus, or in our present day as we see in daily tragic headlines of child abuse or child casualties of war. Having said this, there is a final surprise, namely that God’s surprises not only shatter human limitations and expectation and baffle human thought; but these surprises open up the future to a world where everything is possible including the repair of this world and the restoration of people to right relationship with God and one another. This future—this divine mission—was begun in the birth of this baby whose Presentation in the Temple we celebrate today. Yes, in the expectation of this child during Mary’s visit with her cousin Elizabeth, Mary herself sings the most radical song in the Bible, right under Herod’s nose, so to speak.^{viii} As she sings her Song (of Mary)—the “Magnificat,” as it’s also known—Mary becomes the first of the disciples, prophetically foretelling the Messianic judgment on the haughty, the enthroned, and the full, and the Messianic blessing on the humble, the oppressed and the hungry. She speaks out the purposes of Christ who, as the Book of Acts describes, is the one who will “turn the world upside down.” Although we’ve programmed most surprises out of this season, that is one surprise that sneaks back in—the surprise of the great reversal where God in Christ will cut down arrogant people of power, and offer to the powerless a future and a hope. Mary’s Magnificat still hits a bit too close to home, and surprises us with the amazing news that God—the great Reverser and Restorer—has come to us in such a small beginning as a baby who, in our gospel today, is held in the arms of two elders, Simeon and Anna—in Herod’s Temple. This is God’s Messiah who arrived as an infant and who lives and dies as one of us, and who both comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. Beware, you powerful! Hope, and rejoice, you powerless! This is the final surprise!^{ix}

The life of faith involves living in full expectancy of the unexpected. Each day holds a surprise. But only if we can expect it can we see, hear, feel or understand it when it comes to us. Let us not be afraid to receive each day’s surprise, whether it comes to us as sorrow or as joy. It will open up a new place in our hearts, a place where we can welcome new realities and new friends, young and old, and celebrate more fully our shared humanity.^x

ⁱ Exodus 13:2; 22:29

ⁱⁱ Luke 1:5-24, 57-80

ⁱⁱⁱ The story of Zechariah is assigned only assigned for the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist on June 24 and the story of the Presentation is only assigned for the Day of the Presentation on February 2.

^{iv} I am indebted to Krister Stendahl for some of the ideas connected to these surprises – from lecture notes.

^v In fact, from around 450 BCE up through and after the birth of Christ, another Jewish religious institution was on the rise, namely the synagogue, from the Greek word meaning “congregation.” After the first Temple of Solomon had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, a second Temple was built on that site by the exiles who had returned from Babylonian captivity; but the Ark of the Covenant that had supposedly held the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai, had been destroyed in the destruction of the First Temple, and no replica was created for the second Temple. And the Temple was not intended for congregational worship anyway—instead it was seen literally as the earthly dwelling place of God and where different types of sacrifices were offered by a whole hierarchy of priests and their assistants. And during this 500-year period from the beginning of the second temple to the birth of Jesus, the new religious movement to create a decentralized network of religious, lay-led congregations—synagogues—had spread all across Judah and the Near-East. Instead of high priests and ordinary priests, and Levites (their assistants) directing things from a centralized Temple in Jerusalem, for the most part, lay people and rabbis/teachers emerged as the leaders in these local synagogues.

^{vi} built by Herod after the Second Temple was destroyed in the Maccabean period in the 160s BCE

^{vii} Henri Nouwen, Bread for the Journey (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), January 3 entry.

^{viii} Luke 1:39-56. This song was originally the prayer of the woman Hannah found in the first book of Samuel (1 Samuel 2:1-10). It becomes Mary’s song of the three-fold proclamation—or Manifesto, if you will—that will define her son’s kingdom and her place within it. First, Spiritual: “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.” Second, Political: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” And third, Economic: “He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

^{ix} And the consequences will be painful, as Frederick Buechner points out (see Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 156-157). From the pain of childbirth to the upheaval of Israel, to the pain of Mary holding here dead son in her arms—old Simeon saw all this as he held the infant then and there—at that happy moment he proclaims the fulfillment of God’s salvation promise for all, and then blesses the parents; and he then says to Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” Then something about Mary stopped Simeon, and surprised him, and his expression changed. What he saw in her face was still many years away from reaching its dreadful conclusion, but it was there nonetheless, leading him to look into her eyes and conclude, “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” He didn’t want to have to say that, but he knew he had no choice. Then he handed her back her baby, and departed with something less than the perfect peace that he had dreamed of all his long years of waiting.

^x THE GUEST HOUSE

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.

He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.
-- Jelaluddin Rumi