**February 2, 2014 – Presentation of Jesus**

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Today is the feast day of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple.

I didn’t know this before I went to seminary, but there’s a very specific precedence of feast days in our liturgical calendar. There are the principal feasts of Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Trinity, all of which fall on Sundays, along with All Saints' Day, Christmas Day, and Epiphany, which fall on specific calendar days and should be celebrated on those days.

Then, next in line, come regular Sundays, which are all considered feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ and take precedence over any other feast day except three more feast days, which aren’t principal feasts but which, if they happen to fall on a Sunday will beat out the Feast of our Lord. Are you with me so far? They are:

The Holy Name – January 1st

The Presentation – February 2nd

The Transfiguration – August 6th

All the other feast days, like saints’ days and minor feasts, if they happen to fall on a Sunday, get booted to the next convenient open day (aka, Monday). I’m sure someone took a lot of time to figure all of this stuff out, but we don’t have to memorize it because all of this information is found starting on page 15 of the Book of Common Prayer, if you’re interested.

So today, February 2nd, is the day we celebrate the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple. This ritual had two purposes. One was the purification of a new mother. By Jewish law, specifically in Leviticus 12, a woman was ritually unclean for forty days after delivering a male child or eighty days after delivering a female child. Then, on the fortieth or eightieth day she had to make a sacrifice at the Temple to be made clean again. So in order for Mary to continue to be a good Jewish wife, she had to follow this law.

The second reason comes from Exodus 13, which says that all first born males were to be dedicated to God, and this, once again, had to take place at the Temple. So Mary and Joseph, made the trek to Jerusalem with their month and a bit old baby, Jesus, to do all that was right before God according to their Jewish faith.

It’s while they are in the Temple, going about these standard Jewish family rituals, that they encounter two strange characters, Simeon and Anna.

Simeon, as the text says, was a righteous and devout man living in Jerusalem, and waiting for what the text describes as the consolation of Israel. I’m not sure what that term means, exactly, but the Greek word for consolation – *paraklesis* – is derived from the same word from which we get Paraclete, which is another name for the Holy Spirit or Comforter. So this expected consolation is something that comes from God.

Simon has been told by that same Holy Spirit that he won’t die until he has seen the Messiah with his own eyes. Then, as he’s praying one day, the Spirit says to him, “Hey Simeon, hop on over to the Temple. The Messiah is being dedicated today.” And off he goes.

I wonder what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph. Imagine you’re in church having your child baptized, and all of a sudden this strange man runs up, grabs the baby, and starts singing a song of praise right there at the font! And what crazy lyrics!

Simeon’s song provides the words to what we know of as the Nunc Dimittis. We don’t hear it too often here at Grace because it’s traditionally sung or said at Evensong rather than Morning Prayer. The more familiar translation is:

“Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace; according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people: to be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of Thy people Israel.”

Most of this wouldn’t be a surprise to Mary and Joseph, given the extraordinary events surrounding Jesus’ birth, but wait a second – WHAT was that last line? “To be a light to lighten the gentiles?” Where on earth did that come from? Who even MENTIONED gentiles, much less included them in the Messiah’s business?

And then, as Joseph and Mary stand there amazed at these incredible words, Simeon hands the baby back to Mary with a pat on the head and a little cootchy coo, and the parting words that her little guy was destined to be at the center of a great upheaval in Israel, which would also be a sword through Mary’s own soul. Not a very happy ending to this prophecy!

But wait, the show’s not over yet. As they’re standing there with Simeon, up walks this elderly woman. They might have seen her there before – she had been living in the confines of the Temple for a long time maybe even ever since she had been widowed. Scholars argue, as they always do, over whether she had been widowed for 84 years, which would make her somewhere around a hundred and five, or whether she was actually 84 years old. Either way, Luke means us to think that she’s fairly elderly. I’m going with a hundred and five, because obviously 84 just isn’t that old anymore.

Like Simeon, we only see Anna in this passage in Luke, and nowhere else in the Gospel. And like Simeon, all we know about her is what we read in these short verses, which is basically that she was an elderly widow, she was a prophet, though it doesn’t say if she had been one up to that point, she was from the tribe of Asher, and her father’s name was Phanuel. She, too, comes up to the family and starts telling all who would listen that this little baby was going to be the redemption of Jerusalem.

Then both Simeon and Anna disappear from the scene and Joseph and Mary take Jesus home.

So why do these two people show up in this place and at this time? Well, first of all, Luke was a master storyteller. He puts in details about Jesus’ early years that are found in none of the other Gospels, most likely for the benefit of his mostly Gentile audience. But Luke also places a lot of emphasis on the works of the Holy Spirit, both in his Gospel and in Acts, and this story is another illustration of that.

The Holy Spirit is mention three times in the description of Simeon alone. First, the Holy Spirit rested on him, foreshadowing the Spirit resting on Jesus at his baptism. Then it was revealed to him by the Spirit that he wouldn’t die before seeing the Messiah. This isn’t just a notion or intuition on Simeon’s – the word “*crematidzo*” carries the sense of direct communication, almost a warning. And finally, Simeon is then guided by the Holy Spirit to the Temple that day. The literal translation of that line is, “And he came in the Holy Spirit into the Temple.” He was so completely filled with the Spirit that he was compelled to go there.

How often do we feel the Spirit that strongly in our lives? How often do we receive direct communication or feel so Spirit-filled that we are compelled to take some action? It’s very fashionable to say that the spirit moves us to do or say something, but if push came to shove, do we really believe that? The Holy Spirit sometimes seems to fade to the background in our every day Church lives, except when we trot her out for Pentecost and maybe for Baptisms.

Pay attention, as we continue our worship, to how often we mention the Holy Spirit. What happens when we call upon the Spirit to bless or absolve or sanctify? Are they just words, or is something really happening? And as we leave today, keep looking for ways the Spirit is moving in our lives. They’re there – sometimes obvious, sometimes less so – but there all the same.

When we give to someone less fortunate than we are, the Holy Spirit is there, in the gift and in the giver. When we sit with someone who is hurting or lost, the Holy Spirit is there, in the waiting and in the listening. When we pray for others or ourselves, the Holy Spirit is there in our words and in our heart. And when we share our holy meal together, the Holy Spirit is there, in the bread and the wine.

So spend some time with her. Listen to her voice, feel her touch on your own spirit. Learn to recognize her promptings and encouragement. And watch for the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control – in your lives. Let these be a gentle guide to all your actions and your dealings with one another. If everyone did this, if everyone lived their lives in the Spirit of God the way Simeon and Anna did, think of what a transformed world we would live in.

Amen.