

The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple

Luke 2:22-40m

A place to start with today's gospel from Luke is to ask a series of questions of the text—at least that is how I started on today's talk.

1. Why did Luke write about this Judaic purification ritual—Mark starts with Jesus' baptism, Matthew initially spends time on the genealogy of Jesus, John sets the beginnings from "the word" and the Gospel of Thomas starts with Jesus sayings: like "Those should not stop seeking until they find."

So, taking seeking until I find literally— I briefly want to look at Luke's interests in this presentation at the Temple.

2. Who were these new characters in this scene and what significance do they have to the Jesus story and what do they have in common with Mary and Joseph?

3. What in the gospel reading puzzles or disturbs me and maybe others: *(falling and rising of many which seems backward and Mary's soul to be pierced by a sword ?)*

4. Finally, how does this gospel and the answers to those questions help us on our Journey with Jesus....

So let us start with Question 1

Why did Luke write about this Judaic purification ritual?

(Backdrop)The Presentation of Jesus at the Temple was done following the rituals set forth by the Torah. After the birth of a son as a first born child, both Exodus and Leviticus it is spelt what must be done. It is an important religious and sacrificial act to be performed when the firstborn is a son for **he was in many ways seen as one dedicated to God.**

Christian Churches, both East and West, recognize this important connection to Judaism and many celebrate this by following Luke's description, recognizing this as forty days after Jesus' birth—since in the West we have set December 25 as the date of Jesus' birth, then that

means every February 2 may be celebrated as a “feast day” or special day. When it falls on Sunday, we may or may not choose to recognize it then but Karen thought it would be good to do so and I agree.

Luke makes it clear that Jesus was raised in the Jewish religious tradition. Later in his life when he chose to criticize the Temple authorities, he was doing it as an “insider” as one who had been taught, raised and adhered to the religious “laws.” Therefore, with caveats like - *that the sabbath was made for us we were not made for the sabbath!*

Question 2: Who are these new characters in the scene and what do they have in common with Mary and Joseph?

If we look now at the cover of our bulletin, the scene we have before us is rather peaceful and almost mystical. The parents of this 40-day old infant seem rather rested and relaxed. And Anna hardly looks like the eighty-four years as she does in other paintings and Simeon seems tall and straight, still in his prime! It is clear that each artist and each century has their own way of “seeing” this scene.

That aside, this moment is importantly framed. **The Holy Family of three is now surrounded by two additional persons, who are themselves now spiritually connected to them. They all have the assurance by the Divine that this infant Jesus is the Promised One!**

Looking on this scene in the Temple of Jerusalem, we see Mary holding her infant son leaning toward **Simeon**, the one who had been foretold by the Holy Spirit that he would live long enough to see the Messiah. Guided by the same spirit, Simeon has come to the Temple and recognized the infant Jesus as *The Lord’s Christ’s*. And he says, what has become for us the canticle or the *Song of Simeon (Nunc Dimittis)*

*Lord, now you let your servant go in peace**
Your word has been fulfilled.
*My own eyes have seen the salvation**
Which you have prepared in the sight of every people;
*A light to reveal you to the nations**
And the glory of your people Israel.

The second person is the Prophetess Anna, (short for Hannah) who stayed day and night, fasting and praying in the Temple for decades. I have to assume that her fasting and praying moved her to a point of what contemplatives call “emptying oneself” and *became present deeply* to the Spirit of the Divine within her. She was moved to call others to recognize the infant Jesus as the redemption of Israel.

It is fair to assume, I believe, that every one of the adults in this picture: Mary, Joseph, Anna and Simeon had a spiritual experience with the Holy Spirit in some form. All in different ways but all valid and all bringing them to this point in the dedication of Jesus in the Temple and the recognition of him as the longed-for Messiah.

They all had something no painter can capture because it comes from a deep abiding prayer-filled-practise: call it meditation, contemplation, prayer, dreams or mystical experiences all of which are open to each of us!!

—I know of no other way that Mary could have said YES to the question posed to her as a young woman, to take on bearing and raising this person called to fulfil the role of liberator/Messiah for all peoples—unless she had known before that she was **a be - loved** of God, as we **all** are, and she accepted this, which most of us don’t

—How could Joseph have all his fears neutralized with one dream, if he did not have an ongoing relationship with God—knowing he too was loved and supported—and more dreams and more journeys came!

—How could Simeon have waited so long to let go of life until he truly saw the one to redeem Israel, if he did not deeply trust that Yahweh loved him and would fulfil his hope to see the Messiah before he died?

—What kept Anna for years faithfully praying and fasting if she wasn’t sustained by her deep knowledge and experience that God’s love was within her and that she, as a widow, still had much to give to others..

3. What in this reading puzzled me and/or disturb me that I needed to look at again?

After Simeon blesses Joseph and Mary, he says to her that “this child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel” and he adds, “and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

This falling and rising is in reverse to what we expect, isn't it? The rise and fall of many a leader, or a nation like Roman and Empires in general. Perhaps, just perhaps, this new faith direction that Jesus guiding may mean that the way is to “let go” and go down deep into our souls in order to rise up certainly with the Easter message in our hearts.

And when Simeon tells Mary that her soul will be pierced by a sword—which has so many interpretations, a prediction of the pain she will feel for all that Jesus will suffer—but perhaps even a prediction that his life will draw him away from this nuclear family to create a broad family of non-blood-related brothers, sisters to even include gentiles!

Few parents are really ready for their children to leave them. I remember reading Kahlil Gibran's book *The Prophet* and his section on children:

*our children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from you.
And though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.
(I had no problem reading that at 17)*

And later Gibran goes on to write that parents are like bows from which their children are like arrows that go forth. And even as the Divine loves the arrow that flies, so he loves the bow that is stable.

4. How do the answers to the former questions and the whole story itself help us on our journey walking with Jesus?

Mary and Joseph, we are told, go on to provide a home for Jesus so that *he grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favour of God was upon him.*

I suspect that in that home there was time for both “being” and “doing.” There were practises and examples all around about how to be reflective and to read and pray and even just be present with the Divine within. The

people in today's story all had a relationship with the Holy Spirit and there is an open invitation to each one of us.

We don't have to commit ourselves to be in a church/temple for 24/7 or called to be alone a lot but a few minutes each day even at home in silence might be a start...unless we are waiting for that experience that Saul had on the Road to Damascus...and get thrown off our metaphorical horse in order to start being more conscious of the Divine spark within.

The Good news is that the Holy Spirit is always there and you and I just have to show up! I remember years ago hearing Richard Rohr walk us through the line from Psalm 45:10. *Be still and know I am God*
or one can try Psalm 61.1 *Alone my soul awaits you in silence*

Slowly taking in each word and eventually dropping the last word. Until you are done!

Since the Holy Spirit is everywhere, we are all invited to do what Mary, Joseph, Anna and Simeon did by become overtly conscious of the presence of the Divine within us and being open during our waking and our walking times, in our sleeping and dreaming times or through our flashes of "insight" into the reality of the Divine's love for us and all life.

Any or all of these with enable us to follow in the footsteps of Jesus with the awareness of the gift, the gift of love we have to share.

Amen