

A less than perfect peace

CHURCH OF SAINT CLEMENT·SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 2020·10 MINUTES11 Reads

The Presentation of the Lord

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Luke 2:22-40

In the Name of One God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

For most of us here, our worship consists largely of coming to church on Sunday mornings and celebrating the Eucharist. Our service today is beautiful and meaningful. But it wasn't always the case that the celebration of the Eucharist was the primary celebration on Sunday mornings.

Up until the late 1970s and our "new" prayer book - it was very common for folks to celebrate Morning Prayer on Sunday mornings. Eucharist was celebrated maybe once a month or so. I know there are some of you here who were brought up attending weekly Morning Prayer. This was very much the norm in the Episcopal Church - especially in the southern United States.

Having been born in the mid-70s, however, I was largely unfamiliar with Morning Prayer and the other Daily Office services - Evening Prayer, Compline etc. - until I went to Seminary and we had to attend daily Morning Prayer and occasional Evening Prayer services. I am not a morning person - at all - but I fell in love with these services - especially the canticles - those texts from Scripture that - like the Psalms - are meant to be sung.

My enjoyment of these services and the canticles continued following seminary. As I prepared for ordination, I attended a week-long silent retreat. The only time we were able to speak was during worship. I attended many of the Daily Office services throughout my stay - including Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Compline. These services created the holy rhythm that marked my retreat.

When I left the monastery following my retreat, I picked up a CD of the monks singing Evening Prayer. Once home I would listen to the service at night over and over again. I find the canticle that is central to our Gospel Passage this morning – the Song of Simeon – especially poignant.

*Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A Light to enlighten the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.*

I think one of the reasons I find this canticle so poignant is the image of an old man cradling a young baby, locking eyes and singing about peace and joy. One man is dying – while the baby is just waking up to new life.

The two journeys – birth and death – so closely linked.

The two journeys so deeply holy.

Whenever I read or hear this piece of scripture I am reminded of a video of my Grandfather Edwin cradling my niece Lily. My grandfather at the beginning of his tenth decade of life and my baby niece just beginning hers. It was a warm afternoon and everyone was sitting together on my sister's porch. The video begins with my grandfather complaining about the bugs – as one does.

But then his attention shifts; he is captured by my niece's face. He is sitting in a rocking chair; she is cradled safely in his arms. My family is talking about other things and my grandfather is lost in the eyes of my niece.

“Did you see that little smile,” he says looking up. “She just smiled.” He strokes my nieces pale perfect little feet with his big hands, dark and spotted, weathered from years of farming. He gently tickles her chin.

“You’re a beautiful baby” ...he says just to her. Totally enamored he then looks up again to the rest of us. “She’s a beautiful girl,” he says in the whispered southern drawl we knew so well.

*Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised*

To look into the eyes of your great grandchildren – or your great grandnieces or nephews - the grandchildren of your godchildren - this must be a special kind of peace and joy.

I certainly love being able to return again and again to this sweet moment with my grandfather and niece.

And frankly I love most images of old and young together – each enjoying the company of the other – regardless of whether or not these folks are beloved family members. We saw many of these images last Sunday as photos from the past year were shown in a slideshow at the Annual Meeting. And it is why I love that photo of Annabelle Wright and young Christopher Hudson that so often graces the church’s facebook page.

There are so many opportunities at this church for old and young to come together and share in relationship – whether it’s when we are playing games together at a parish picnic or fishing at Shrine Mont; welcoming a new baby into the life of this community through Holy Baptism, or watching as one of our oldest members recommits his life to Christ.

These moments are deeply holy and life giving for all.

The Temple brought the elderly Simeon and infant Jesus together - and our church does the same today - for old and young alike.

But in addition to its poignancy and sweetness why else did Luke end the story of Jesus’ infancy with this encounter at the Temple in Jerusalem and why is Simeon’s

song paired with Anna's prophecy? What is the Gospel writer trying to communicate?

We need to look at the construction of the text to begin to understand its significance. The Song of Simeon closes out the infancy narrative of Jesus in much the same way the story began - the ending of the episode perfectly paralleling the beginning.

Surprisingly, the Gospel according to Luke does not begin with a story about Jesus.

Rather, the story begins with an elderly priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth.

Luke writes, "Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years."

Of course this is Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, and she and Zechariah would soon become the parents of John the Baptist.

There is a lovely - and somewhat amusing - story throughout the beginning of the Gospel about Zechariah. Having been struck mute by the angel Gabriel for his disbelief about the impending birth of his son, Zechariah was not able to speak until several days after John was born. Then, when his voice returned, his first words were a song:

*And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.*

Luke begins his story of the Good News of Jesus Christ with the story of the faithfulness of an elderly couple – Zechariah and Elizabeth. The narrative of Jesus’ infancy ends with the story we hear today of the faithfulness of another elderly man and elderly woman, Simeon and Anna. The story begins with the song of Zechariah and ends with the song of Simeon.

All four of these faithful people are older and in Simeon’s case – near death. All have been filled with hope and expectant longing. All have sat in darkness. Deep darkness. All recognize the light that dawns from on high. All respond to God and give thanks.

The story of Jesus’ birth and its importance rests within the stories of these faithful elders.

We hear the men’s voices – we hear their words captured in song. And we hear much about Elizabeth – and her relationship with Mary. It is in her womb that John leaps upon the news that Mary is pregnant too.

But now in this passage we are introduced to a widow named Anna. Like Elizabeth she is well on in years. There are only a few sentences that describe who she is and, unlike Elizabeth, we do not hear any of the words she speaks. We know though that she has spent decades in worship, prayer and fasting. She was alone in the world but deeply connected to God.

One day, after so many that had started the same way, she looked up and she saw a baby and she saw Simeon and she heard the first words of his song; her heart leapt.

But then she heard his words grow darker and more foreboding. It was a darkness and a loneliness she knew. It was a darkness and loneliness that Mary would come to know too.

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel," Simeon said to Mary after he blessed her and her husband.

"He will be a sign to the world.

But he will be opposed by the world.

The world will not accept the light and love and peace

emanating

so clearly

from this beautiful baby boy.”

Simeon sighs, suddenly devoid of the joy of a moment before, and says to Mary

“and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

The great preacher Frederick Buechner writes poetically about the shift in tone in Simeon’s song.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation," he said (Luke 2:29), the baby playing with the fringes of his beard.

The parents were pleased as punch, and so he blessed them too for good measure.

Then something about the mother stopped him, and his expression changed.

What he saw in her face was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. "A sword will pierce through your soul," he said (Luke 2:35).

He would rather have bitten off his tongue than said it, but in that holy place he felt he had no choice. Then he handed her back the baby and departed in something less than the perfect peace he'd dreamed of all the long years of his waiting.”

Nothing about the peace of God is perfect. Nothing is clean. And certainly nothing is simply sentimental.

“The peace of God it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.”

We sang these words just last week.

“Yet let us pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace of God.”

Why does Luke sandwich the story of Jesus' infancy between the stories of these four old and faithful witnesses?

One reason may be to point us to the reality of the peace they had hoped for – the peace coming into a broken world – the peace they needed to know – yearned to know - the peace which they recognized was born in the baby before them.

For me, I think there are many reasons this canticle – this song of Simeon and the story within which it is set – is so poignant.

Certainly because of the warm feelings it conjures up for me. I feel sentimental when I hear it and when I think of the elderly folks I have loved in my life and the love they so freely gave to others. We need these images of love to sustain us.

But it is poignant too for the pain and grief and loneliness born by the elderly in this story – and by the elderly in all of our stories.

I remember talking with my grandfather as he grew older and as his weekends were filled attending the funerals of those whom he loved. Soon he and his sister were all who were left of the friends and family of his generation.

The wisdom and graciousness of our elders is a precious gift.

As is their faithfulness. And their intuition. Their ability to recognize the holy and their willingness to witness to it.

The current Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby wrote about this gospel last year.

“This is not just the story of a young boy Jesus who is recognized as the Son of God,” he writes. “It’s also the story of the people who recognized him. After many years of praying and waiting, Simeon and Anna finally recognize the one they have been waiting for.

Archbishop Welby continues, “So it’s a story about growing up. Getting older. Living through painful times and suffering. Staying faithful. Becoming wiser. Its also a story

about being part of a community that prays and worships together, and finds strength, comfort and encouragement in that.”

Ultimately it’s a story that says: don’t worry, nothing is wasted in your life. Everything that happens to us – the struggling, the hurting, the loving, the praying, the growing, the healing – are all experiences that can enable us to recognize God in Jesus. And to have confidence in the safety of God’s love.”

Maybe that’s what gave Simeon his confidence to meet Mary’s eyes and say – knowingly - “and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

“The peace of God it is no peace, but strife closed in the sod.”

We sang these words just last week.

“Yet let us pray for but one thing – the marvelous peace - and light - of God.”

Amen.