

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
February 2, 2025 – The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple
Luke 2:21-40
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In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we actually continue Luke's account of Jesus' birth. I'd like to read the verse before the passage we just heard. After Luke describes the shepherds' visit to Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger, he writes: "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb" (Luke 2:21). Jesus was circumcised because this was the sign of the covenant between God and Israel, and every Jewish male infant was expected to be circumcised. At the time of circumcision, the baby was given his name. When the angel Gabriel had announced to Mary that she would bear God's child, he instructed her to name him Jesus, from the Hebrew "Yehoshua," which means "the Lord saves." Some churches celebrate this event on January 1st, the Feast of the Holy Name of our Lord.

Our passage this morning describes events that took place in the Temple in Jerusalem forty days after Jesus' birth. Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph took Jesus to Jerusalem "to present him to the Lord" and that "they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.'" According to Jewish law firstborn sons were to be dedicated to the Lord, and scripture records that this is what his parents did.

This morning's passage from Luke makes clear a fact that is illustrated repeatedly in the gospels: Jesus and his family were good and faithful Jews. Jesus studied with rabbis as a young boy. He attended synagogue and read from scripture and preached there. He paid the required Temple tax. He ate the Passover meal with his disciples. He upheld the validity of much of his tradition. In fact, some of his most important teachings – the Two Great Commandments to love God and our neighbors as ourselves, for instance – come directly from the Hebrew Bible.

We may forget this important background when we read about Jesus' highly charged encounters with some of the Pharisees and other Jewish religious leaders. His entire life and ministry were devoted to God, to teaching and demonstrating to people what the kingdom of God was like. Jesus called people – calls people now – to live according to God's laws of justice, mercy, compassion, and love. So, when Jesus encountered religious leaders who were hypocrites, self-righteous, all too willing to find fault and reject people, who abused their positions of power, and who focused on the details of religious observance and lost sight of God's "big picture," he confronted and challenged them with strong words.

Within the account of Mary and Joseph bringing the infant Jesus to the Temple are two testimonies about who this child really is. First, the witness of the "righteous and devout" Simeon. He is a faithful Jew who has been waiting for the Messiah. The Spirit leads him to the Temple when Jesus was presented. His hopes have been fulfilled; he has seen the Messiah. Holding the infant Jesus in his arms, Simeon makes an important point about Jesus' mission – he has come both to save Israel and to be a light to the Gentiles, non-Jews. Jesus has come to all people, another lesson we find repeatedly in scripture. The prophetess Anna, a faithful Jew who spent all her time at the Temple, also said that this infant was "for the redemption of Jerusalem," the hope of Israel.

Within the speech of Simeon are words which need some explanation. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so

that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” In his ministry Jesus will bring the truth about God and God’s kingdom to light. As he does this, the people who encounter the truth are challenged to make a decision. Will they accept or reject the truth as Jesus tells it? Will they follow Jesus or reject Jesus? How will Jesus’ message and “the inner thoughts of many” align or fail to align? Jesus called those who heard his message to make choices for light or darkness, life or death.

What lessons might we learn from today’s Gospel reading? The example of Jesus and his family suggests that there is something valuable about religious observance. It is not by any means all there is to life according to God’s way, but it is important. Knowing how Jesus and his family followed their religious traditions may guide us as we decide how to follow ours. I am reminded of the advice of the Dalai Lama recorded in “The Book of Joy.” Choose a religious tradition and stick with it, going ever deeper in its practices and teaching over time. In contrast, sampling a little bit of several traditions and never deeply exploring one often fails to lead to spiritual maturity.

Then there is the question of what effect our religious life has on us and on others. Over time as individuals, are our worst selves gradually improving and are our best selves getting better? Are we more loving? Is our love expressed in action more often? What about parish life? As we worship and work together over time, is there less criticism among us and more affirmation, fewer demands and more gratitude? More generosity of spirit and of gifts? Less “self” and more “other”? Less concern with the details of religious observance and more concern with what Jesus teaches us is most important? Our answers to these questions reveal our “inner thoughts” about how we are following Jesus.

In today’s religious climate in our country, I believe we are called to discern how Christian groups do or do not follow the teaching of Jesus. To do that, we need to know the teaching of Jesus. My opinion is that the best way to learn that teaching is through the study of scripture, both the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament and the New Testament. Read and study and take the messages to heart. Pay attention to Jesus’ words. Then measure the teaching of different branches of Christianity and its many spokespersons against the teaching of Jesus.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus says words that I find chilling. “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits.... Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day [which means the Day of Judgment] many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:15-16, 21-23). How dreadfully important it is to do the will of God! The will of God that is to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Incidentally, these are the words of Jesus that immediately precede Jesus’ teaching about building a house on rock or building a house on sand, quoted by Bishop Budde in her sermon at the National Cathedral.

We find these words in the New Testament, in The Letter to the Hebrews (4:12): “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” We who have been blessed to know God’s Word in Jesus Christ and in Holy Scripture are called to live by that Word, to the glory of God and for the world Jesus came to save. Amen.