

Messengers

Feast of the Presentation, February 3, 2019

The Church of the Ascension

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Thus says the Lord, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. - Malachi 3:1-3

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him. - Luke 2:22-31, 36-40

"Thus says the Lord, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me ..." When we hear that first line from today's first reading, we Christians naturally think of John the Baptist. But that same text from Malachi continues: *"... and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."* This Malachi text is meant to prepare us to better appreciate Christ's first visit to the temple, as described in today's gospel. There in the temple, two unexpected messengers, Simeon and Anna, assist in preparing the way before the Lord.

Simeon and Anna are in fact the last two of many messengers who permeate the first chapters of Luke's gospel. The very first scene in the first chapter of Luke features a messenger, an angel, sent to a devout priest named Zechariah. The angel has come to tell Zechariah that his prayers have been answered; his wife Elizabeth will have a child, a son, John.

Some of you may know that the Greek word for angel, ἄγγελος, literally means messenger. And more angel-messengers are sent to prepare the way of the Lord as Luke's gospel gets underway. Gabriel is sent to Mary: *"Hail, favored one, the Lord is with you."* Nine months later another angel-messenger appears to some shepherds watching their flock by night, bringing them *"good news of great joy for all the people."*

The opening chapters of Luke are also populated with human messengers. Zechariah, and his wife Elizabeth, and Mary, and the shepherds – they all have their moments and their messages. All of them are also portrayed by Luke as preparing the way of the Lord.

And then come Simeon and Anna. They almost seem to be lying in wait. And that wouldn't be far from the truth. They have been waiting and praying, waiting and praying, all their lives – waiting and praying for this moment.

We don't know what in particular Anna had to say that day, but Simeon broke out in song – or at least a prophesy that has become a beloved and enduring part of Christian worship, what we call the *Nunc Dimittis*, sung by the choir as we began today's liturgy and heard again in the gospel reading.

Luke may have included Simeon's song in his gospel in part because of the line about the '*light for revelation to the Gentiles.*' Luke himself was a Gentile, an outsider to the people of Israel. His gospel is uniquely full of scenes and messages, such as the 'Good Samaritan' and the 'Prodigal Son' that prepare the way of the Lord in us by challenging notions of who is in and who is out in the eyes of God and in the heart of God. Preparing the way of the Lord can sometimes begin with an updated, divine view of ourselves or others.

Simeon and Anna are clearly venerable elders, they are steeped in prayer, we get the sense that they have seen it all and persevered. Encountering them this morning may bring to mind some blessed elders from our own lives. They can be so familiar to us that we miss the fact that they have been messengers because of whom you or I have better prepared the way of the Lord.

One such elder who comes to my own mind is the man who became pastor of my family's church when I was ten years old. He taught me how to play chess, and he taught me to pray – not only the holy words but also how to begin to open my heart to my God. I last heard from this venerable elder ... last week! He still checks up on me from time, mainly, I believe, to encourage me and to learn how he can continue to pray for me and for my family and for my parish. I can't count the number of times he has been a faithful messenger of God for me. On occasion his messages have been, as the prophet Malachi describes, '*like a refiners fire.*' And I gather you also have some venerable souls in the spirit of Simeon and Anna in your lives. Perhaps you will find a time and place to remember them and give thanks.

Interestingly, I believe this text from Luke may also be viewed through a completely different lens. Simeon and Anna did not, after all, seem to have had any prior relationship with the family of Jesus. In Luke's account, they come out of nowhere. Neither Simeon or Anna appears in any other gospel. We won't hear from either of them again.

Viewed through this lens, you or I may wonder about messengers of God who may have fleetingly appeared in our lives and then gone. You may remember the story I told last Sunday, about the stranger who recently said to me: "*You still have more new places in you.*" I refer to that story again because of the quality of preparing the way of the Lord that I felt in her remark. Some idea or a new possibility – or even the potential for a new idea at my age, or a new possibility, began to take shape in me.

Or I'm thinking of a story I once heard from a Midwest folk singer, Claudia Schmidt. She was young and restless and living in Chicago, and on one particular sweltering summer day she was having a nasty and public fight with her boyfriend on the fire escape outside of her apartment building. A police officer, leaning on his squad car on the street below, was looking on and found a moment to shout up: "*So – lady – are ya gonna leave him?*" That police officer was the messenger

of the moment, appearing out of nowhere to prepare the way for her recognition that the relationship was abusive and going nowhere.

That may not sound like a 'religious' story. And maybe that's exactly my point. I wonder how often you or I may miss divine messages and messengers if we imagine that we know when and where or through whom or in what form they will come our way. Be on the lookout for Simeon or Anna, or some other unlikely or fleeting messenger. They will be stepping out of the shadows at some critical moment to prepare the way of the Lord in or through us.

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way ... The verse is preparing us to appreciate and give thanks for the messengers Simeon and Anna. And their example, in turn, invites you and I to wonder about the messengers and messages that may have come our way, or those still lying in wait for us, to prepare a more divine way in us.

But wait, there's more! Before ending we should also wonder here, at least briefly, about those for whom you or I may be the intended divine messengers. Do you know that nudge that says, "*Now it's your turn?*" It's your turn to deliver the message that will prepare the way of the Lord in and for others.

Don't we all know some who are in trouble on fire escapes? Don't we all know some who are in need of light or encouragement or prayer? Don't we all know some who are in need of a refiner's fire – a reminder of the right thing to do? Or clarity about the work of love that seems impossible but must nonetheless be embarked upon.

Who will be the messenger if not you or me?

Amen.