

Sermon
02-02-2025
Luke 2:22-40

Today we celebrate the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. It is 40 days since his birth, and it is time for purification. This day of celebration links the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem with the purification of Mary and the presentation of Jesus in Jerusalem.

For us a child is born, for us a Savior is given.

There should be trumpets blaring. There should be banners waving, and jubilant crowds filling the Temple, all singing songs of joy and salvation.

But that is not the scene in which we are taken in the telling of this event. Instead, we enter a quiet temple. There are no crowds. Only a sense of respectful humility and gratitude given in poverty. Only 2 elderly people, Simeon and Anna, await there to receive the Christ child. They have waited a long time.

In many ways, this is a reiteration of Jesus being born in a manger, in a stable, among the livestock among the poor. It is similar to Bethlehem, where there ought to have been fanfare, but where there was instead humility and hardship. It is a group of simple shepherds that point the way to the birth of the Christ child. Humility points the way to God.

When the Wisemen come to see the Christ child, they bring beauty to this humble setting. But they are prescient of the dangers that lie ahead for this child and thus do not return to King Herod with news of the birth. Knowing the vulnerability of the Holy Family, the Wisemen offer Mercy. Humility points the way to God, and Mercy protects and magnifies God's Holy Spirit.

The message of humility and Holy Spirit are present in today's story as well. The Holy Family has come to the temple for a purification ceremony. They are there to be symbolically cleansed and reintegrated into the community following childbirth. This practice was an act of humility and faithfulness to God. The Holy family brought a sacrificial offering of two small birds. Such an offering was the sign of an impoverished family. To many, this family would have been passed off as insignificant. But instead, in the temple, they are recognized as great people of God. Simeon recognizes the divine presence amidst the simplicity of a baby and the modesty of poverty.

Simeon takes the baby in his arms and praises God for sending the Messiah. While Simeon is relishing this moment of joy, he also knows that there will be pain.

Simeon is wise and understands that in their service to God, the Holy Family will witness great social and personal struggles. With kindness and compassion, he foretells Mary of her suffering.

Anna is the other person to recognize the Messiah. By stating her name and citing her heritage, Luke signifies that she is a woman with a story of some importance. Historians believe she was likely related to those who were exiled and then released from Assyrian captivity. As such, in this story, she is a living symbol of God's faithfulness. She has sequestered herself in the temple fasting and praying night and day since her widowhood. Anna recognizes the divinity of Jesus, and amidst her loss, she sees new life and redemption.

These recognitions of Jesus by Simeon and Anna herald a new world, herald a new Kingdom on earth.

To the Hebrew people, the birth of the Messiah meant that God would bring forth a system of justice that would set the world right. The Messiah would restore social balance by restoring dominion to God's chosen people, thereby putting an end to the enslavement and oppression of the Hebrew people. This was divine justice. This was Divine Victory.

Now there were different viewpoints on how the Messiah would accomplish this. But the end goal was the same.

What Jesus brought to the world was a new understanding of God's Justice and, also importantly, how justice is accomplished. He taught that without God's justice, there can be no true Victory – no end to suffering, no end to oppression. Through his ministry, he would go on to teach how Victory is achieved. He would go on to teach that, it is through patience, tenderness, preference for the poor, and hurting. He would teach that Victory is acquired through acts of compassion, kindness, and mercy.

In my youth and with an immature theological understanding I often saw Jesus as someone who was somewhat lawless. Probably to a teenager, this is somewhat of a romantic image. But too, perhaps this misunderstanding arises from the many scriptural portrayals of Jesus verbally sparing with the Pharisees and Scribes. But Jesus isn't lawless. Jesus understood the laws of Caesar. He understood the laws of his Hebrew faith. His objection was that he witnessed them carried out without compassion and mercy or uniformity of justice for all. Jesus taught us that mercy and compassion, as well as respect for the dignity and well-being of all of God's beloved people, must go hand in hand with the implementation of Law.

Jesus didn't break the laws of Caesar. This was Pilate's problem at the execution of Jesus. Jesus hadn't specifically broken the laws of the land. But what Jesus did do is stand up and proclaim that in the world in which God wants us to live into, God's majesty has dominion. And justice be meted out with mercy and compassion and dignity for all.

The Roman Empire in Jesus' time and throughout the first and second-century Christian era was ruled by fear and brutality. They rode into cities on horses, clothes in armor, and carrying standards that displayed their colors, displayed their physical power. Victory was achieved through violence. Peace was achieved through conquest and was defined by a successfully suppressed people. The Roman Empire is gone, although vestiges of it certainly remain. Foundations built on brutality do not survive. Foundations built on oppression and hate do not survive.

Love survives, survives all things. Only Love brings enduring Victory.

The brutality of the LA forest fire destroyed the hills where it burned. But over time the plants will grow back. Shrubs and grasses will return. Homes destroyed in fire will be rebuilt, and families will return to inhabit them. Those who find love in this place will return. In God's world, this divine world we call Earth this is Victory.

One of my favorite scriptural lines in today's passage from Luke comes at the end.

We read:

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.

The Holy Family fulfilled the law of the Land in Bethlehem and the Law of the Lord in Jerusalem as was required, and then they went home where Jesus would grow in God's wisdom and favor- with God's blessings and love. Again, there is no overt fanfare, no trumpets, or displays of power achieved through tyranny. The Victory of Jesus, the Messiah, the one presented in the temple, and who walked among us and with us, the one who died and was resurrected to save us from ourselves, that Victory is achieved through God's wisdom and favor – and love.

Amen