

The Presentation of our Lord

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Text: Luke 2:22-40

Gracious God, grant us always to seek the truth; come whence it may, cost what it will. Amen. Feels like we need these words after this week, don't we?

It has been 40 days since Jesus' birth, and in the church we celebrate this day as The Feast of the Presentation of our Lord – it is based on this story that is only found in Luke's gospel. It is one of the oldest feast days of the Christian church, having been celebrated since early in the fourth century in Jerusalem.

Luke seems to combine two Jewish rites in this story: the presentation, or redemption of the firstborn child in the temple, which is found in the book of Exodus; and the purification of the mother 40 days after giving birth, which is explained in the book of Leviticus. This purification ritual requires that the woman bring an offering to the priest in the temple of either a young lamb or, if she is too poor to afford that – as was the case for Mary – she presents two turtledoves or two pigeons.

So, this is where we find Mary and Joseph in our reading this morning, in Jerusalem at the temple a mere 40 days after Jesus's birth in Bethlehem – they have come to fulfill the law, to perform the required rituals of their faith...and I can only imagine how exhausted they must have been as brand new parents often are.

I have learned from journeying with family and friends as they have welcomed new babies into their lives, that the first month or so after that baby comes home is pretty rough, especially if it's the first baby in the family. There are sleepless nights, uncertainty about what different sounds and cries mean, fear of not doing something right or not having all that they need to care for this new little being, and did I mention sleepless nights? The common experience seemingly shared among all new parents is exhaustion.

This would have been the same for Joseph and Mary, they were brand new parents. Jesus is their firstborn child. They were likely no different than any other first-time parents before them or since them – trying to figure it out as they go along – diapering and feeding and soothing and rocking and weeping and not sleeping for days and nights on end. The joys and challenges of newborn babies.

Add to *their* experience, however, a harrowing journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and Mary giving birth on the way in a stable because they couldn't afford or find a room with a soft, clean bed. It seems that these would have been a rough 40 days – overwhelming even – and, yet, they still must go to Jerusalem and present Jesus in the temple and make their offering to the priest in order to fulfill the law of Moses.

Remember, too, that they lived in very uncertain times which, I imagine, added to their weariness. In Matthew's birth narrative we learn a bit about what they faced: the king was unscrupulous and insecure; he was so afraid of losing power that after Jesus's birth he solicited the aid of three foreign men to find out what they could about who this king sees as his future opponent (the baby Jesus) and give him the dirt on what was happening and where he and his family were. He uses false pretenses – that he just wants to know so he can do the right thing with the information – when we know, from Matthew's story, that his intentions were nefarious. Just to be clear, I'm talking about Herod.

I imagine their wonderings as they prepared for this day, another journey, to get to the temple to perform these rituals, wondering if it's worth it. Wouldn't it be better to just stay in and rest, to sleep for the few precious hours they get while their baby sleeps? While we know they were devout and their faith was clearly deep, I wonder if they, like many of us sometimes, just wanted to stay in bed. I wonder if they thought, "Ok, we'll go, we'll present the baby, we'll make our offering and then get home."

Or, did they go because performing the same rites as their ancestors had been performing for generations would give them comfort? Did the words and songs and rhythms of the rituals feel like home? The familiar words of the scriptures, the smell of incense in the temple, the prayers offered by the priests and perhaps even other parents and worshipers – would all of this have given them a place to feel safe and able to rest and restore themselves, to strengthen themselves for the journey ahead? Did they long to be there, to renew their spirits and rest in the comfort of the rituals and traditions of their people?

They went, perhaps, not expecting much, just to take care of their responsibility and go home. But, instead, they were surprised; they were surprised by joy and welcome and love when they encountered Simeon and Anna in the temple. I wonder if their exhaustion was forgotten in those moments; was the fear and uncertainty and doubt and worry of new parenthood carried away on the songs of praise of these two faithful people? Did they find comfort in the familiarity of the language and the community and the rites they engaged?

These questions resonated with me this past week. I was reminded of the comfort and peace of our communal liturgy; of how much I need the familiar words and actions; how much I need the rhythms and cadences of our prayers and songs.

I was reminded that often, when I am feeling unmoored and uncertain, when the world feels as if it has gone off its axis, the liturgy, engaged here together as a community, is a place of refuge and renewal.

My soul and even my body longs for this – for the standing and the sitting and even, on occasion, the kneeling. The call and response of the prayers and psalms reminds us that we are one body.

The words of confessions and creeds remind us that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves; that millions of others are reciting these words in places all over the globe and they have been doing so for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years.

The liturgy binds us together. It carries us from the minute we engage it – the ringing of the bell, the procession into the church – to the minute we depart with a charge to go into the world and share the love of God. The liturgy has a shape and it, in turn, shapes us. It tells us who we are and what we are called to be; it helps us articulate what we believe and know to be truth:

We believe in praising God and recognizing God's authority in the world – that's where we start each service with our opening acclamation and prayers.

We believe that the scriptures have something to say to us about our lives and our world today.

We believe in prayer; we pray, not just for ourselves, but for others, in the church and in the world; we pray for our enemies.

We believe in humility; we confess that we fall short, we admit that we don't always love the way God calls us to love; we acknowledge our mistakes, and we ask to be forgiven and we seek to forgive each other.

We believe in peace, so we seek to make peace with one another, greeting each other in peace.

We believe that we are transformed by Christ and by the meal we eat together, sharing one bread and one cup, facing one another around this altar – each of us loved, each of us whole, all of us created in the perfect image of God.

We believe in our call to mission; we leave together, commissioned to share the good news of God's love in the world.

We will do all of these things together today, just as we do every Sunday. To me, there is comfort in this. I need this liturgy today.

Like many of you, I suspect, I found myself exhausted this past week, worn down by the divisiveness and ugliness on display in our country and around the world. I am weary of the unkindness, the name-calling, and incivility that has replaced civil discourse. It seems that truth is no longer important and respect for the dignity of other human beings is no longer valued. It all is taking its toll on us and we need a place of respite, a place to remember whose world we truly belong to and what the values of that kingdom are. For me, that place is here in this liturgy today.

It is in the rhythm of this ancient rite, this weekly journey that I find rest and renewal. It is where I find hope and strength. It is where I witness joy and welcome and love. We do this for a reason, friends – there is a reason for every word we speak, every movement we make. The liturgy, whether we realize it or not, shapes us.

So, like Mary and Joseph, we come to engage this ancient rite even when – or perhaps because we are weary and seeking rest. When we enter it and give ourselves fully to the rhythms and familiarity and when we allow it to move and shape us, we too can be surprised by joy.

I bet you've had moments like that here at St. John's: the warm embrace of an old friend or someone you met for the very first time; the look of heart-felt knowing from another weary soul as you face each other across the communion rail; the sound of the beautiful voice of the person sitting near you singing praises to God.

This is what the liturgy is for. It's supposed to get in your bones and carry you when you need it to. Let it settle in this morning, if you are feeling worn down or uncertain. Let it carry you back out into the world renewed and ready for the days ahead. We need to be renewed; we have work to do in this world. Amen.