

**Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon Jensen
at Calvary Episcopal Church
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
The Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple
February 2, 2014**

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.

In the middle ages, in parts of Europe, there was a belief, superstition even, that surrounded this date. Some Christians adopted and adapted an earlier observance on the second of February. The Church knew this time as the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple or Candlemas. There is an old saying associated with the day. “If Candlemas be fair and bright, Winter has another flight. If Candlemas brings clouds and rain, Winter will not come again.”

If February 2nd brought fair weather, it was believed the winter would be long and the crops poor. If foul weather fell on Candlemas it was believed winter would soon be over and the crops bountiful. Does that sound strangely familiar in western Pennsylvania? We have adopted and adapted the idea again and again so all these divergent notions have coalesced into something we recognize. We call it Groundhog Day which is today, February 2nd.

Today, at Calvary, we celebrate. We have much for which we can be thankful. There is a confluence of events. We are near ground zero for Groundhog Day. There are the church feasts of the Presentation, the Purification of the Virgin Mary, and Candlemas. There is the Super Bowl. It is the first Sunday of the new rector. The choir will be pleased to know I **should** be able to keep the sermon to just **under** one hour.

Those are too many subjects for one sermon so let us narrow our focus. All of the parts of the story come together at the Temple in Jerusalem. Luke, the Gospel writer, is trying to show who Jesus is and what the Christ means to the world and, by implication, to each of us.

Mary and Joseph went to the Temple in Jerusalem to fulfill two, related, religious obligations. The first we call the Purification. According to the Law of Moses, a mother was to abstain from religious practices for forty days after childbirth and then offer a sacrifice. For the wealthy, the gift was a lamb. For the poor, like Mary and Joseph, the offering was two doves or pigeons. This small detail is a reminder that Jesus was from among the common people.

The second religious obligation they fulfilled we call the Presentation. This was the first of many times for Jesus to be in the Temple. According to the Law of Moses, the family was to dedicate their firstborn son to God. Practically, they gave five shekels to the priest. This was done in remembrance of the Exodus when God spared the firstborn of the Hebrew people. In the 7th century in Rome this feast was observed with a procession of candles and the singing of the Song of Simeon. Candles for church use were often blessed on this day. It took on the name “candlemass” or mass with candles. These two feasts always fall on February 2nd or forty days after the observance of the birth of Christ at Christmas.

These two ritual observances, the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Jesus, converge in this scene. While in the Temple, the dedicated meeting place with God, the young family encountered two older, wise figures. One male and one female, Simeon and Anna. Simeon believed he would see the Messiah before he died. Meeting Jesus was what he was living for, what he had been waiting for. Anna was an 84 year-old widow who lived at the Temple praying and fasting. She carried great authority. If a movie version were made of this story I can easily imagine Morgan Freeman as Simeon and Judi Dench as Anna.

Simeon and Anna each made a pronouncement about who Jesus was and what he meant to the world. Their vocation was to point to the Kingdom of God breaking into the world, especially through Christ. To proclaim who Jesus was... was their mission, their vocation, their calling. Quite simply, the Kingdom of God is a small part of Heaven connecting with our world. The wise figures pointed out where and when Heaven and Earth came together.

Mary and Joseph also had a vocation or calling from God that Simeon and Anna helped them to clarify and understand. The two older, wise figures helped the young couple to grasp the depth of its importance and the faithfulness necessary. The young couple was not ready. They had little financial means and few connections and no real idea what was in store for them. All they were called to do was to be faithful in their own time with their own vocation.

In this single scene there is represented a person in the twilight of life to one just forty days old. Male and female. Married, single, and widowed. All types of people are needed to point to the Kingdom of God already breaking into our world. Mary, Joseph, Simeon, Anna, and Jesus each had a vocation particular to them yet dependent on the others. They needed each other. Each person here also has a call to point to the Kingdom of God in our midst.

You may be here every time the church is open or you may be a back pew sitter. You may have a \$1 million or nothing but the clothes on your back. Young, old, married, single, widowed, whatever color or age or charism does not matter. Each person is needed because you can help us all to see a part of Heaven coming into our world. It is a vocation and perspective unique to you but dependent on every other part of the community.

The mission of Calvary has evolved over the years depending on the circumstances or needs of the city and diocese or the particular gifts here. This day is vitally important but it's not about me or rectors or staff past or in the future. What matters most is what God is already doing and will do in *your* life. What matters is recognizing the Kingdom of God already breaking in through Calvary Church and this great city of Pittsburgh.

Our call is to honor the past but also adopt and adapt and evolve. To be faithful in our own time with our own vocation to point to Heaven come to Earth. Each person here and your gifts are needed for Calvary to be the community – that God needs us to be – for the city, for the Church, and for the Kingdom.