

Malachi 3:1-4
Psalm 84
Hebrews 2:14-18
Luke 2:22-40

Epiphany 3C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple feels a bit like liturgical whiplash! We've gone from Christmas – seems so long ago – with the beautiful baby in the manger, adoring parents, shepherds and angels, to the arrival of strange and wise men from the east who saw a star so bright they couldn't help but follow. Then we skip something like 30 years, to Jesus' temptation in the desert, his baptism in the river Jordan, on to his first miracle at that wedding in Cana, then his very first sermon back in his hometown of Nazareth.

In today's reading, Jesus is a baby again, just over a month old – 40 days old to be exact. And in accordance with Jewish Law, on that 40th day, Mary took herself to the temple to be purified and to present her first-born child as an offering to God. It was a very important day in the lives of Mary and Jesus, not just because of what happened for them, but also for what such rituals teach us. One of only three scriptural references to Jesus before his adult life, the Presentation tells us so much about what formed Jesus as he grew into adulthood.

Jesus was born a Jew. We know that, but we don't always think about that when we hear of him wrestling with Jewish religious authorities. I've heard people say Jesus was the first Christian, the "founder" of Christianity, which he certainly was not. Jesus was a Jew, and I don't imagine he ever thought of himself as anything other. He was born into and raised in a tradition that praised God in every aspect of life, a tradition that claimed praising God as the sole purpose of life. *"From the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised"*¹ the psalmist said. Jesus would have grown up with those psalms.

Praising God has always been an essential part of Jewish ritual observance. The Israelites didn't just pray their gratitude, they marked it. They built altars, not for sacrifice but to remember and to make a way for those who would come after them to remember the faithfulness of their God. When the Israelites had nearly come to the promised land and crossed over the river Jordan, someone from each of the 12 tribes brought a stone from the river to build an altar. *And When your children ask in time to come, "What do those stones mean to you?" then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial forever.*² Reminders of God were created and observed everywhere, as a reminder that God is everywhere.

¹ Psalm 113:3

² Joshua 4:2-7

The story of Jesus' presentation in the temple shows both the beauty of Jewish ritual and Mary and Joseph's faithfulness to it. This is a story that helps us to know Jesus by knowing something of the life he was born into. The Law of Moses required that after a woman gave birth to a son, she remained apart from the temple, apart from all holy things for 40 days. According to the Law, she was impure for that time. At the end of the time of being apart, the mother brought a sacrificial offering to the priest and in making that offering she was made pure.

Jesus was brought to the temple and offered to God – that's what was prescribed by Jewish Law for any first-born male, whether he was an ox or a baby boy. First children, first fruits, first animals, all of the first ones, the most precious ones, the ones you could count on, all of them were offered to God, even before you could know there would be another. It was Jewish Law, yes. But that Law was a gift that helped God's people to keep God in the center of their minds and their hearts and their lives. Jesus was born into a centuries old tradition that set God at the center of all life.

This story of Jesus being offered to God in the temple, this story of Mary offering herself, is a story of faithful people whose ordinary lives were wrapped in ancient tradition that never ceased to hold supremacy in their lives. This little family went to the temple to fulfill the law and when they did, they were offered the blessings of two other odd, extraordinary and ordinary people. Simeon, an old man who never gave over to the temptation to doubt, knew he would see the Savior before he died. That had been God's promise to him. God's Holy Spirit rested on him, and that Spirit drew him into the temple... drew him to the young woman with the baby in her arms, and then he drew the baby into his own arms. When he looked into the eyes of the baby Jesus, he knew his eyes had seen the Savior, and he marked that moment with gratitude and praise. *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.*³ He knew. He knew and he proclaimed, and his proclamation was so strong, so bold, so profound, that even Mary and Joseph were stunned. Simeon, the one on whom God's Holy Spirit rested, proclaimed Jesus as the Savior and the Light of the world. The prophet Anna was there too, praising God for the gift of the baby boy who would be the light to enlighten all nations.

None of that would have happened if they hadn't all been the faithful people they were, if they hadn't been committed to the rule and ritual of Jewish life. And other than Simeon's prayer, a prayer I've said more times than I can count, what speaks most strongly to me in this story is the incredible importance of religious ritual in the lives of the people who surrounded Jesus.

Observing rituals and living them out is something that seems to have gone by the wayside for most people. We do ritual things here on Sundays and that is surely meaningful. But Judaism's insistence that all of life be an act of praise, is a far cry from the way most Christians live. And while it's true that Jesus criticized some of the religious authorities because they were

³ Luke 2:29-32

scrupulous about their rituals, it wasn't because the rituals were bad. It was because Jesus knew the fullness, the goodness, the lifegiving nature of the Law that prescribed those rituals. So, when the Law was used to diminish rather than increase life, Jesus called that out. But the Law, the ritual, the practice he grew up with, is something very important for us to think about.

"Keeping the Feast" is the way Jim and I talk about taking every opportunity to recognize God at the heart of things. When we are in different places, most every morning whoever awakens first texts *"This is the day the Lord has made..."* and the other replies *"Let us rejoice and be glad in it!"* It's a small thing, but it reminds us to recognize that God, and the people we love, come first. Life in the world as we know it is devoid of most religious ritual, devoid of most any ritual that transcends the alleged importance of our busy, daily, secular lives, lives filled with things that can seem to be far more important than the living God. Such very important lives have utterly diminished the significance of ritual – be it religious or otherwise. Sports, meetings, doctor's appointments, careers, personal trainers and personal preferences have usurped praying or studying or even eating together. Transcending the banality of everyday life, recognizing the sacred in everyday life, recognizing God at the center of everything isn't something we easily or naturally do. Religious rituals have mostly been reduced to funerals or weddings or baptisms, necessary things to endure before we can get on to the "celebrating."

So the next time you wonder what on earth I am doing, praying over ordinary pieces of chalk or plain old tea light candles, think of this: Every time we do such things, we transcend the ordinary and recognize God's work, God's presence, God's being in the stuff of our daily lives. God is surely in the holy places, but we make a mistake when we think the holy places are buildings or books or particular people. When Jesus came to be one of us, God made apparent the reality that we are the holy places. This is what happens for us here, in this place. One of the many things that sets St Barnabas apart is transcendence. This is a place to transcend – not leave behind, but transcend the dreariness of life and know ourselves to be set apart as precious and holy, to and for God. This is why we use special words, sing special hymns, say special prayers, kneel and bow and pray and praise. This is the way we do what Mary and Joseph, and countless others have done before us in setting themselves apart for God. It is essential that we do things differently in this place, that church does not melt into secular, "regular life" so that for just a little while every week, we can come into this place and transcend the mess that is outside those doors. This is not to escape, rather it is to nourish and nurture our spirits, to remind us of the holiness of God and to remember that holiness will, if we let it, permeate every single moment of our lives. Amen.