

Presentation of Our Lord: The Sword of Sorrow and the Station by the Door  
Psalm 84; Luke 2:22-40  
February 1-2, 2020  
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Is anyone here a firstborn male? If so, according to Jewish Law, you belong to the Lord! The good news is, unlike a firstborn male lamb or calf, you wouldn't have to be sacrificed on the altar. Instead, your parents would "redeem" you by offering an animal in your place. Jesus was a firstborn male. His parents followed the Law very faithfully, so on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after His birth they had him circumcised. 40 days after His birth His mother went to the Temple for her purification from childbirth. That's a foreign concept to most of us, except those who remember the "churching" of Roman Catholic mothers in the days before Vatican II. But all we really need to know is that Jewish law required this purification and Mary and Joseph were lovingly obedient to the Lord in all things. Mary had to offer sacrifice as part of that cleansing ritual, and her offering was 2 turtledoves. This was because she, whose Son is the Lamb of God, didn't have the money to purchase a lamb.... The Law was compassionate and made provisions for the poor, including the substitution of a less pricey animal as a burnt or a sin offering. Joseph went with Mary, and while they were in God's sanctuary they presented the infant Jesus to the Lord. We celebrate this feast of the Presentation of Our Lord on February 2<sup>nd</sup> when it falls on a Sunday, and also every third year on the first Sunday after Christmas (Cycle B of the lectionary). So if the story doesn't seem all that familiar to you, it's because you may only hear it every few years or even less often if you're tempted to skip worship the weekend after Christmas 😊.

The Temple was enormous and was quite a destination for worshipers and visitors alike, so certainly there were other people there with the Holy Family. They wouldn't have expected to have the whole place to themselves any more than we'd count on St. Patrick's or St.

Peter's to be empty. But there were two people who took **particular** interest in Jesus, this not-quite-six-week-old Baby. These two had been waiting and watching for a good long time for God to fulfill the promise of a Savior. St. Luke doesn't tell us how old the man, Simeon, is but he comes right out and tells us that the woman, Anna, is 84 years old. She'd been widowed for almost a lifetime and was a real Temple groupie. When Luke says, "She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day," we can guess he's exaggerating **a bit**, but the bottom line is, Anna's an extraordinarily prayerful woman who could have written Psalm 84, assigned to us this weekend:

*<sup>1</sup>How dear to me is your dwelling,*

*O LORD of hosts!*

*<sup>2</sup>My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD...*

*<sup>10</sup>For one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.*

Anna spent the better part of her days and nights in the Lord's Temple, delighting to be in the Lord's presence. She was in such intimate communion with the Lord that God spoke not just **to** her but **through** her; St. Luke calls her a prophet (Luke 2:36). She was also an en-**courage**-r of others, speaking "*about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem*" (Luke 2:38b). I'd say that means when people were despairing about the heavy boot of the Romans laying heavy on the neck of their nation, she would remind them that not only had God promised a Messiah, but God had come through! **She** had **seen** the fulfillment of the promise! Not that the holy Child was destined to lead a military uprising – but He would certainly liberate His people from the sin that enslaved them.

Unlike St. Matthew, St. Luke doesn't write about the slaughter of the innocents or the flight into Egypt, but he does recount sobering words from Simeon to Mary. He prophesies that her Son will not be embraced by everyone, that some will decide against Him, that He will be a stark light revealing people's **true** thoughts and motives, which often aren't pretty. He adds, "*and*

*a sword will pierce your own soul too.*" My Grandma Flossie Horton had a painting of Mary with her heart pierced by a sword, artwork based on Simeon's words. My Grandma's tugboat captain father had been lost at sea when she was a child, then as an adult she buried two of her children and helped to raise 4 grandchildren (including my sisters and me). I'm thinking she found comfort in the knowledge that Jesus' mother knew sorrow, too, and had received God's grace to endure the sadness, the stabbing pain of grief, and to stay faithful in the midst of what John of the Cross might call "the dark night of the soul."

St. Luke paints us a tender scene of Simeon cradling the Baby Jesus in his arms like an adoring grandparent who has longed and prayed for such a gift. Then Simeon foreshadows the time when this young mother will stand beneath the cross on which her grown Son hangs. Last week I showed slides of the da Vinci painting (the Benoit Madonna) in which the Christ Child, held by his joyful mother, clutches a little cross-shaped flower in his chubby hand, foreshadowing Calvary. You also saw the painting in which St. Ann reaches out to prevent Mary from separating her Child from the little lamb who signifies His passion. The shadow of the cross is cast over the manger and so many other real and imagined scenes from our Lord's Babyhood and Childhood.

Someone has said, "...sorrow may be the redeeming sword of revelation."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the events that threaten to shatter our souls may actually be the ones that allow us to help others heal. It's as if the intense heat of the furnace of suffering breaks open the pine cone that releases seeds of compassion, enabling them to fall onto the forest floor of our life, germinate, sprout. We have holy ones among us, elders like Anna, both women and men, and some younger people, too, who floor the rest of us with their steadfastness, year in and year out, who leave us in awe as we see the trials they've faced, the suffering they've endured, the sorrows they've known, and yet remained faithful. Just the other day one of our church friends said to me, "I'm worried about it.

So I'll take it to prayer tonight." The only rational course of action, right? Take every little and large concern to the Lord. Be in intimate communion. In the words of Psalm 84 again:

*<sup>10</sup>For one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.  
I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God  
than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*

The Rev. Samuel Moor Shoemaker was a pastor in NYC and one of the spiritual leaders who drafted AA's 12 Steps in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There's a poem he wrote that builds on Psalm 84's reference to standing at the threshold of the house of God. Here's part of it:

I stand by the door.  
I neither go too far in, nor stay too far out,  
The door is the most important door in the world –  
it is the door through which folk walk when they find God.  
There's no use my going way inside and staying there,  
when so many are still outside, and they, as much as I,  
crave to know where the door is...

The most tremendous thing in the world  
is for people to find that door – the door to God.  
The most important thing anyone can do  
is to take hold of one of those blind, groping hands,  
and put it on the latch – the latch that only clicks  
and opens to that person's touch.  
People die outside that door, as starving beggars die  
on cold nights in cruel cities in the dead of winter –  
die for want of what is within their grasp.  
Others *live*, on the other side of it – live  
because they *have* found it,  
and open it, and walk in, and find Him.  
So I stand by the door...

As for me, I shall take my old accustomed place,  
near enough to God to hear Him, and know He is there,  
but not so far from others as not to hear them,  
and remember they are there, too.  
Where? Outside the door –  
thousands of them, millions of them.  
But – more important for me –  
one of them, two of them, ten of them,  
whose hands I am intended to put on the latch.  
So I shall stand by the door and wait

for those who seek it.  
'I had rather be a door-keeper...'  
So I stand by the door.<sup>2</sup>

This is inspiration for us who know the Savior to introduce others to Him – inspiration for us who know suffering to allow God to use our hurts to heal others – making us whole in the process.

Amen

<sup>1</sup>Interpreter's Bible (vol. VIII, Nashville: Abingdon, 1952), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in *Celtic Daily Prayer* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), pp. 624-625, 627.

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