

Presentation of Our Lord: "Pilgrimage to Holy Places and Holiness"
Psalm 84; Luke 2:22-40
February 1-2, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

For anyone who made a New Year's resolution to read the Bible: the psalms are the prayer book of the Bible. There are 150 of them. In *Evangelical Worship* they are the first 150 songs – of brilliant joy and deep sadness, pleas for forgiveness, cries for deliverance, expressions of trust, confessions of doubt, awe over creation, praise of the Creator. Psalm 84 is one of my very favorites. It is soulful, passionate, and includes birds:

*¹How dear/lovely/beloved is your dwelling,
O LORD of hosts!
²My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD...
³Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young,
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts, my king and my God.*

Solomon's Temple had open-air courts, soaring pillars, remote nooks and crannies in which birds could build their nests, raise their broods, sing their songs of praise.

I couldn't help but think of Psalm 84 when Pastor Mark & I visited the Holy Island, Lindisfarne, during my 2nd sabbatical trip 6 years ago, a year before lockdown. Lindisfarne is in the North Sea, part of Northumbria, in northeastern England close to the Scottish border. We were with a small retreat group led by Sr. Margo, one of our friends from St. Marguerite's in Mendham. Every evening our little group went to evening prayer at the 900-year-old Parish Church of St. Mary, a 5 minute walk away from our accommodations on that tiny island. The entry doors are very heavy, very thick wood, but what really caught my attention were a couple baseball-sized holes bored through the doors above eye level. When I wondered out loud about the holes, I was told to look high up in the narthex, the church foyer. There I saw bird nests. Some long-ago lover

of “all creatures great and small” drilled those holes to give the birds safe entry and exit, even when the church doors are closed and locked.

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Such kindness to creatures is not foreign to the culture and history of the Holy Island, and its now ruined monastery dating back to the early 600’s. Saints Aidan and Cuthbert were abbots of the monastery early on. Cuthbert, in particular, was known for his love of animals. He forbade the kitchen monks from killing and serving the Eider ducks (from which we get eiderdown) even when other food was scarce. (In Cuthbert’s honor, their nickname is Cuddy ducks.) The animals also apparently loved him – he frequently spent cold nights in prayer on a little spit of land off the island, and legend has it that an otter would come and wrap itself around Cuthbert’s legs to warm him.

Lindisfarne has been a pilgrimage destination for centuries. People hike for 60, 70, or nearly 100 miles to the 3 mile Pilgrim’s Way that leads to Lindisfarne, across mud flats accessible only at low tide. What **is** a pilgrimage? Simply put, **a pilgrimage is a trip to a holy destination.** Pilgrims **are** travelers, but they **aren’t** just tourists. Pilgrims are spiritual seekers, folks who go to places others have gone and experienced a divine Presence they also hope to encounter. Some of you have been on pilgrimages, or visited pilgrimage destinations. Anybody here want to share?

- Lindisfarne, England
- Iona, Scotland
- Skellig Michael, Ireland
- Knock, Ireland
- Chartres, France
- Lourdes, France
- Annecy, France
- Assisi, Italy,

- Rome, Italy
- Santiago de Compostela, Spain (El Camino)
- Medjugorje, Bosnia & Herzegovina
- St. Anne-de-Beaupré, Quebec
- Basilica of Guadalupe, Mexico City

Jerusalem, of course, is a major pilgrimage destination for 3 world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In today's Gospel, Mary & Joseph take Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord as first-born son and to offer sacrifice: 2 turtle doves (because the mother of the Lamb of God did not have money to purchase a lamb). Psalm 84 is a beautiful go-along psalm for this Gospel story, because it is a Song of Zion, a Song of Ascent, a song that groups of Jewish pilgrims would sing as they traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate religious festivals.

When Mary & Joseph take the 40-day-old Infant Jesus to the Temple to present Him before the Lord, they are not accompanied by tens of thousands of fellow pilgrims, as they would be for Passover. But the song of their little family pilgrimage echoes down through the ages to us in the form of old man Simeon's canticle (song). We call it by its first two words in the Latin translation, *Nunc Dimittus*, "now dismiss," *Thy servant in peace....* (Luke 2:29) The *Nunc Dimittus* is always part of the Church's night prayer, just as Mary's Magnificat is always part of evening prayer. What a beautiful prayer to recite before we fall asleep: "*Lord, dismiss your servant in peace from this day's labors, joys and sorrows.... May Your thumbprint be upon it all, now entrusted into Your keeping. Grant me rest this night, that I may rise refreshed to love and serve You again. Amen*"

Two special people make their sole cameo biblical appearance in today's Gospel: Simeon and Anna. These are the elderly, faith-filled, loyal-for-a-lifetime holy ones who have spent their lives in prayer and worship. To their hearts the Holy Spirit has spoken, keeping alive the hope of the arrival of the Messiah: *the consolation of Israel* (Luke 2:25), *the redemption of Jerusalem* (Luke 2:38). I think about the faith-filled, prayer-full seniors in our midst, among whom I include Edith

Derres, Ruth Walsh, Anne Brown, Nancy Sabo. On the day of Jesus' Presentation in the Temple, Simeon and Anna are exactly where they're accustomed to being, and exactly where they are **meant** to be: **present** to witness the **Presence** of the Messiah! The pilgrimage of their lives has reached its divine earthly destination: they have lived to see the Messiah, and in one of the tenderest scenes in all of Scripture, Simeon holds the holy Baby in his arms.

Simeon lovingly cradles the Baby and speaks to His mother Mary, cryptically telling her:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too." (Luke 2:34-35)

In other words, following up on last week's Gospel and homily: what is good news for some is not good news for others. Simeon and Anna rejoice over the arrival of their Savior and literally embrace Him. But there are others for whom the Messiah's teaching will be a stumbling block, blasphemy, and cause to reject Him. At a future time, some will shout "Hosanna!" and others will demand, "Crucify!" The slaughter of the innocents in St. Matthew's Gospel and Simeon's solemn prophecy in St. Luke's Gospel tip us off that there will be darkness as well as light in this story. That reality is also seen in the reaction of Jesus' neighbors to His preaching in the Nazareth synagogue, a story we would have heard continued today from last week if this Sunday weren't the Feast of the Presentation. Jesus' neighbors hear Him say that He is the fulfillment of Scripture about the One anointed by the Spirit to bring good news to the poor, the captive, the oppressed. Their response is to try to push Him off a cliff. They heard Him, all right; they just didn't like what they heard.

"...and a sword will pierce your own soul too," Simeon tells Mary. That's a powerful foreshadowing of the Pietá, the mother holding the body of her crucified Son. Mary, the mother of our Lord, is heavenly companion for any parent who has ever buried a child. There's artwork in

the Roman Catholic tradition of Mary with her heart exposed, literally pierced by a sword. My Grandma Flossie Horton had that picture in her bedroom. It just occurred to me, “No wonder: Grandma buried 3 of her children.” She was a prayer warrior, though, like Simeon and Anna,. Tragedy didn’t cause her to lose her faith; by God’s grace, faith was her consolation.

¹How dear/lovely/loved is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts!

²My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD...

It’s in community worship that we receive the Word and the Sacraments that are the means of grace, inspiring and propelling us forward as forgiven and grateful children of God, joyfully and courageously **being** and **spreading** Good News in this world. It is the love of God that flows to us through Word and Sacrament that strengthens us to act faithfully and obediently, whatever the cost, even if it is rejection.

This sanctuary is our pilgrimage destination today. It is where we seek God and express our longing to be in God’s presence. This weekend Carly and Nick bring Baby Mia Frankie to receive the gift of Baptism, to be marked with the cross of Christ forever, to receive the light of Christ, to be the recipient of our prayers that she may shine brightly with the light of Christ, lifelong. As the community of faith we pray that, like the Lord Jesus, she and **all** our children, may grow in grace as well as age all the days of their lives. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham