



Sermon for the Presentation of our Lord
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February 2, 2020

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A man decided to join a monastery and chose an order that lived their lives in almost complete silence. In fact, their vow of silence was so strict that they were only allowed to say two words a year – and they spoke those words at their annual meeting with the Abbott. The first year went by and the man had his first annual meeting with the Abbott and his two words were “food’s bad.” Another year passed and he met again with the Abbott and this time his two words were “bed’s hard.” A third year passed and when he met with the Abbott he said “room’s cold.” Finally, at his fourth annual meeting he said to the Abbott “I quit!” and the Abbott said “I’m not surprised, you’ve done nothing but complain since you got here.”

Silence can be challenging, as our monastic friend found. Last week I talked about the practice of silence as a key to being able to discern God’s calling and work in our lives and I see that theme arising again in this week’s gospel story – specifically in the lives of Simeon and Anna. I’d like to talk about these two elderly people a little more, but first we need some context for this story that describes them.

Today, Feb. 2, is the fortieth day since Christmas Day. Under the law of Moses, which Luke quotes in this story, a woman who gave birth to a boy was required to stay home, away from community gatherings like worship in the temple, for forty days after the birth. Then, on the fortieth day, she was to present an offering at the temple. In addition, a woman’s firstborn son was to be presented to the Lord and consecrated at the temple – and Jesus was Mary’s firstborn son. So, the holy family has come to the Temple on the fortieth day after Jesus’ birth to fulfill the requirements of the law.

And this is where Simeon and Anna enter the picture. If you come to Evening Prayer on Thursdays you recognize Simeon’s words – we say them at Evening Prayer as the Canticle we call the “Nunc Dimittis” – that title is taken from the Latin translation of Simeon’s first words: “you now dismiss” and provides a beautiful and poetic ending to our day as we pray in the evening.

Here is what intrigues me about Simeon and Anna: how did they know what they knew? Luke says that the Holy Spirit has revealed to Simeon that he would see the Lord's Messiah before his own death and Luke tells us that Anna immediately recognized this six-week old baby as the one sent to save the people. How had Simeon and Anna developed such an awareness of God's presence, such a sensitivity to God's work, and such a level of discernment about God's will, that they were able to know what God was doing just by seeing a baby brought into the temple?

Perhaps part of the answer is to be found in what Luke tells us specifically about Anna: "she never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day." Anna's faith was not a casual or occasional pastime. She didn't just pray when the fancy struck her, or when she especially needed help, she lived in a state of prayer. Anna didn't just open herself to God's presence from time to time, she lived in a constant attitude of worship, expecting to see and experience God's presence at any moment and at every moment. Luke doesn't describe Simeon's spiritual practices as he does Anna's, but we can guess that it was something similar. People don't go around describing you as "righteous and devout" with the Holy Spirit resting on you unless you practicing prayer, worship, and communion with God on a constant basis.

Over the centuries since these events so long ago, Christianity has developed a terminology for the kind of lives that Simeon and Ann were living. We call it "the contemplative life" and those who practice it we often call "contemplatives." We all have an idea of what it means to "contemplate" something: it means to think about it, and more than just casually. To contemplate is to think deeply, over time, returning again and again to something in our thoughts in order to see and experience it from new angles. So, Christians who practice contemplation think deeply about God, over time, returning again and again to God in order to see and experience him from new angles. And Christian contemplation is about more than just thinking about God – it is about experiencing God's presence and contemplating God's love in communion with God through the Holy Spirit. The writer Richard Rohr describes it in this way: the contemplatives were those whose "primary quest was for God, for Love; everything else was secondary."

It is by living this contemplative life that we are enabled to recognize God's will and participate in what God is doing in the world – as Simeon and Anna did that day in the Temple. The contemplative life may sound intimidating to us, but it is, in fact, much simpler than such extreme measures as entering a monastery where you're only allowed to say two words a year. If, as Rohr says, contemplation means making God, and

God's love, the primary quest of our life then it doesn't mean we don't have other, side quests – such as a happy marriage and family, a fulfilling career, or enjoying our hobbies. It does mean, though, that when we think about the purpose of our lives, when we think about the story of our lives and the ultimate destination to which our journeys are taking us, we think of growing more deeply into God's love for us and for one another.

When we realize that the contemplative life doesn't mean we don't have a life, it means that God is at the center of our lives, then we begin to realize that anyone can live a contemplative life – not just holy saints who live night and day in temples. Any one of us can pause throughout the day to practice silence, to read the scriptures and listen for God's voice, or to simply be in a prayerful attitude to lift up our needs to God and receive God's gracious love into our souls. Contemplating God and God's love is not so much about some heroic effort to climb to a mountain top or live in a temple. It is about learning to be open, day by day, moment by moment to the fact that God is always present in every circumstance in which we find ourselves.

In short, the contemplative life is about being presented to God as Jesus was presented in the temple: with simplicity, with devotion, and with faith. As our collect says today: "Almighty and ever living God, we humbly pray that, as your only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple, so we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts by Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever."

Amen.