

Acting in faith and being present

Luke 2:22-40

To be present is to be known, and it is a way to proclaim our intentions. By being here today, you are present. You are proclaiming your intentions that you are a faithful follower of God, and you are here to thank God and praise God, and to be part of a community that lives out this call in the world.

This rite of passage for Jesus is one that acknowledges that we all have much to learn from each other. We can learn from both the past and the present. Even after a long journey to Bethlehem and then back to Jerusalem now with a newborn, Mary and Joseph somehow managed honour tradition. To fulfill the Jewish law of bringing their newborn to the temple, and while doing so, making a sacrifice in honour of God. Typically, a lamb would be presented, but Mary and Joseph were very poor and thus presented two turtledoves. These were gifts associated with people of limited means, and though they may have been of limited means, they were truly blessed, and blessed in such an amazing way that most people didn't know. They were blessed because they had been given the task from God to care for and protect this child. God's child.

Don't know if you know, but turtledoves symbolize innocence, purity, and enduring love and faithfulness. Mourning doves symbolize the advent of something that is unseen. They are a picture of devotion. So here you have Mary and Joseph with the child – the Chosen One of God – coming to the temple and presenting turtledoves that captures that innocence that also is a symbol of something that is unseen, but also a picture of devotion.

Today is truly a ceremony and a ritual that is a celebration of new life. It's also about belonging, and becoming a part of something beyond oneself. If you think about it, the journey that Mary and Joseph were on was one that had been quite isolating. Here they were, wandering towards Bethlehem along the road. We don't know if they had family with them. Not only did they have knowledge of who this child was, they were also living what many thought to be a scandalous life. According to the people of the village where they came from, they were unwed

and yet they had a child. This couple was really left to their own devices. They were alone. They had to rely on the generosity and hospitality of others. Along the journey, while they were in Bethlehem, they found some people who believed. They found some people to connect with. They were given words of encouragement when the shepherds arrived. They were given words of comfort when the angel appeared to them, saying, "Do not be afraid, for God is with you."

Here in the temple, they were also given physical connection. They were taken from isolation and they were no longer alone. Both Simeon and Anna were waiting for them, and they continued to wait until they arrived, and it had been quite some time that they were in this state of waiting. Simeon, like Mary and Joseph, had the Holy Spirit rest upon him. Simeon held knowledge that others did not. He had been told of what was to come, and so he was waiting for the Messiah, the Chosen One of God. He had been told that before he died, he would meet the Messiah.

When this poor, tired couple came into the temple with two turtledoves, Simeon knew instantly that this was whom he had been waiting for. Simeon's dedication, patience, and faith had brought him to this moment. When he saw Jesus, he took the baby in his arms, and he praised God. He thanked God for this precious gift. Simeon proclaimed: "God, you can now release your servant. Release me in peace as You promised. With my own eyes, I have seen Your salvation. It is now out in the open for everyone to see. A God revealing light to the non-Jewish nations and a glory for your people Israel." In that moment, holding that child, Simeon had found peace. He had fulfilled what God had called him to do. He had achieved what he had set out to do. He was a good and faithful servant. And now his work was done and he could rest.

Mary and Joseph were shocked by Simeon and what he said. To hear someone who was considered a wise man proclaim these words, I'm sure it meant to Mary and Joseph with a sense of relief. There were others out there who believed; there were others out there who had heard the words of God. Mary and Joseph were no longer alone. They had shepherds, they had angels, they had wise ones, they had Simeon, they had Anna...all who believed what God had told them. Both Simeon and Anna now shared the truth of what they had been told about Jesus. With each passing day after Jesus was born, the good news began to spread, and people heard that this tiny child, this innocent child would bring peace to the world. That he was special and that he was a gift from God.

I'm sure at first, when they walked into the temple, they felt a bit of shame. Maybe they were a bit embarrassed. They probably weren't really sure what they were supposed to do. What if the priest rejected them because of the fact that Mary had gotten pregnant out of wedlock? But instead of judgement, when they walked into the temple, they were welcomed with open arms. They were accepted for who they were. Jesus was lifted among the people and he was blessed. The people gathered in the temple to hear them share the news and it brought them great joy.

But that wasn't all. Simeon also shared with them the painful news. The truth of what Jesus would face as he grew older. He told Mary: "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and will 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." I can imagine how hard it would have been to hear this, and I have no doubt that it weighed on Mary her whole life. But she didn't hold this information alone. Mary, Joseph and Jesus were now being held by the entire faith community that had gathered that day.

We, like Jesus, welcomed into faith through the act of baptism, which we will be celebrating next Sunday. Baptism and confirmation are the opportunity for the community of faith to welcome, encourage, and support a person on their faith journey. Today is a reminder that we are here to support each other on our faith journeys. Our strength and our wisdom come from the scriptures, they come from experience, and it comes from hearing other people's journey. Which you shared just a little bit today. The sacrament of baptism is a sacred act that acknowledges that the love of God – the Holy Spirit – now rests upon the person being baptized. In baptism, we receive the invisible seal of God's love as the water is poured over us. Here at Robertson-Wesley, after a person has been baptized, we pledge to care and support for that person. We proclaim the following words: "We will support you, walk with you, and grow with you. With God's help, we will live out our baptism as a loving community in Jesus Christ, nurturing one another in faith, holding one another in prayer, and encouraging one another in God's work." So Anna and Simeon are good role models for us all. They both spent most of their lives in the temple praying and living according to God. They dedicated their life to the work of God and they were both very disciplined and dedicated to what they were called to.

Being people of faith isn't always easy. It often requires work and discipline. Loving and caring for all people – sometimes very challenging. Over Christmas,

sometimes this becomes very apparent in our families when some of those old dynamics reappear. When we don't always get along with the people that we have grown up with. Maybe we don't see eye-to-eye. But we must remember that we are called to love all people. To see them as a gift.

Waiting for things to change is also not easy. I hope that on this day that we will look to our elders for wisdom. How has their faith sustained them all these years? What can we learn from our elders to help us sustain our faith as we continue on our journey? How will our prayers and our spiritual practices prepare us for the moment when we are to welcome people to join us in living out this call together? How will our actions also reflect this calling? How will we work together to make a difference in the lives of the people we serve? The scripture today is a reminder that we don't do this alone. We are here to listen to one another, bless one another, and give thanks to God for each other. So let us be renewed in our commitment as disciples this day. May our New Year's Resolution be that we will join together, work together, and encourage one another to live out our call to faith in this world. To use all the gifts that God has given us. To help heal the broken-hearted, bring justice and peace to this world, and ensure that all people know that they are valued and they are loved. For this, we give God thanks. Amen.