

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Feast of the Presentation, 2/2/2020, Luke 2:22-40
(*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

So, what's with the white today? It's the Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord, and we are required to observe it in the Episcopal Church when February 2nd falls on a Sunday. This feast, also known as "Candlemas," takes place forty days after Jesus' birth. The last time it fell on a Sunday was 2014. Good news for you if you have lingering Christmas decorations up: this is considered the real, final end of the Christmas season in some circles, so if you take down your decorations today, you can say "Hey! I'm not a slacker. We just leave them up until Candlemas."

Forty days was the traditional time for women who had given birth to be purified following a birth, and that ritual just annoys me so I'm not going to dwell on it, other than to point out that including this story shows that Jesus grew up in an observant Jewish family. Later in his life, as we know, he was critical of some Jewish religiosity—not Judaism in general, remember: Jesus was Jewish! But he did stretch some rules, so please understand that when he was critical, he spoke as an insider. Firstborn sons were understood to belong to God, so they were presented at the temple forty days after birth and redeemed by offering a sacrifice.

We use part of today's Scripture, the "Song of Simeon," in Compline, that gorgeous nighttime service in the *Book of Common Prayer*. Compline starts on page 127, and I recommend it as an office to pray before you go to bed. The Song of Simeon is one of the final sections. But we Episcopalians cut off what Simeon says in Compline, because as we can see in today's reading, he goes on a bit, after dazzling with his beautiful words "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." After that glorious bit of poetry, Simeon says to Mary, Jesus' mother, "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."

A few years ago I was trying to gain a better appreciation for Mary, the mother of Jesus, and after buying and starting to read various books, I tried something more experiential: I prayed a seven sorrows rosary every day for a month. That experience did more for my relationship with Mary than any sort of study. The seven-sorrows rosary takes seven sorrowful experiences from Mary's life, which of course, closely touched Jesus' life. All of these seven sorrows center on Jesus. The first sorrow is this story, the presentation: hearing that her soul would be pierced.

I suspect the ritual of presenting a newborn in a temple was normally a joyful experience—while the theology is not comparable, perhaps the joy was a little like infant baptism here. Imagine, then, if on the baptism cakes, instead of "Happy Baptism," we wrote things like "This baby is gonna break your heart"? Or "Warning: opposition and sorrow ahead!"

We mark transitions in our lives: births, deaths. Next week, we will celebrate with our new vestry members and wardens, having a commissioning service. If we knew everything the new vestry would need to do in the next three years, would it be a good idea to tell them? Would that foresight be a burden or a blessing? Was this prophecy from Simeon really a "sorrow" for Mary?

I'm sure Jesus was the deepest source of joy for Mary, but the Bible also makes clear that Jesus wasn't an easy person to parent. Imagine the burden of raising the Light of the World. Imagine the sorrow she felt at his death, and the shock of his resurrection.

I love that the presentation takes place in a house of worship, because I can relate to that today, since so many of our important times of transition take place in such sacred spaces, like this one. This room is consecrated. Holy. Its walls are drenched with our prayers. I have been blessed to be a part of many celebrations here. They linger, and whenever I come in, I feel a piece of them. So much joy and beauty and prayer.

For example, I think of my Celebration of New Ministry back in 2011. That was a sacred service that took place right in this room. Part of what happens during a celebration of New Ministry, for those of you who have not experienced one, is that the new rector kneels within the congregation and prays a long prayer that can be found starting on page 562 of the *Book of Common Prayer*. Another priest who was there that day, Eileen Walsh, told me that every rector in the room that day would remember praying that same prayer amidst their own congregation at their celebration of New Ministry. That prayer connected me to many other sacred spaces.

When I re-read those words preparing for this sermon, I remember kneeling here, surrounded by my new parishioners as well as people from my former congregation, praying that all the desires of my heart and will would center on what God would have me do. I couldn't believe I was a rector. It was something I had dreamed about for more than ten years. I wasn't sure I could do it. It seemed like a culmination of so much work, and I also knew that it was a beginning, and that there was so much I didn't know.

Kneeling there was a moment of profound excitement for what was to come. I am grateful that I did not know that day how many of the people in the room that day would no longer be here nine years later. Some died. Some left the church in anger, at me. I'm passionate about St. David's and it has been my deep honor to serve here, but I am glad that I didn't know that day all of the things that were going to come. I'm grateful that in times of transition in my life, I didn't have someone like Simeon to tell me the dark parts.

And of course, the sorrows are only one piece of it. I could not have imagined how much I could love the people I serve here. I could not have imagined the babies who would be born. The families whom I would see through many transitions: births, baptisms, confirmations, marriages. Deaths.

Yesterday, our diocese ordained a new Bishop, Bishop Susan Haynes. The service was filled with excitement over this new ministry. I wonder what's in store for Bishop Susan? I wonder, if she knew the sorrows which are ahead, would she have still said yes to this call?

What about you? Have important parts of your life taken place here or in other sacred spaces? What if someone had told you, and those times of transition, what was ahead?

A friend gave me a poster in high school that rhymed, which normally annoys me and did even back then. I can't remember what it said exactly, but I know I had it on my bulletin growing up a

while, and it said something along the lines of, “I wish I knew the things I’ll do, the special dreams I’ll make come true. I wish I wish that I could see the life the lies ahead of me.”

Even back then, it didn’t strike me as completely true, because even then, I knew that even the most wonderful times and transitions in our lives weren’t pain-free, and that knowing all of those things would make me afraid.

Simeon was right, of course. There was much opposition to Jesus. Reading the Gospels, especially the parts in Holy Week, are terrifying. The inner thoughts of many were indeed revealed, and they were unholy.

But Jesus was also promised to Simeon and his people, and he fulfilled that promise, and his sacrifice stretches to us today. Being Christian does not take away our sorrow and being Christian will surely cause us sorrow. Being part of a faith community is a gift; and, it means bearing one another’s burdens. Being with each other not only to share joys, but sorrows. As we observe this feast today, let yourself linger with Mary in the sorrowful part, while also embracing the beauty of the moment.