

A sermon preached at the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, February 2, 2025
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton

Malachi 3:1-4. Psalm 84. Hebrews 2:14-18. Luke 2:22-40

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Have you noticed that throughout his life, Jesus regularly worshiped in the synagogues on the Sabbath and in the temple in Jerusalem on High Holy Days? And Jesus took his disciples with him for regular worship in the synagogue and Temple. This holy habit of regular worship with the community of faith began when Jesus was a child in today's Gospel.

The Jewish community never worshiped out of fear that they might go to hell if they didn't go to the synagogue or temple. They worshipped because God told them that it would be life-giving for them. They knew from years of experience that when they stopped connecting with God through regular worship and prayer with their community, when they stopped listening to and trying to live the scriptures God had given them, their lives as a nation and as individuals fell apart. They lost their way. Especially when they lived as a minority within a dominate society motivated by different values and priorities, they would lose their identity, their God connection, and stray from the fulfilling and life-giving way God created them to live.

So, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem to be Presented or dedicated to God on the 40th day after his birth, according to Jewish custom. It was a time of great joy and thanksgiving, not just for that family, but for the community gathered there on that day. God's Spirit is re-ignited in us when we worship and share together with others who are also alive with the love and Spirit of God. Simeon was an old man with a long and deep connection with God. He came, as usual into the temple after Joseph and Mary and Jesus arrived.

Simeon had been wrestling within himself and with God for many years about the authoritarian and oppressive control exercised by the Roman political and military leaders who ruled over the nation of Israel. Heavy Roman taxes made survival increasingly difficult. Every day there were new stories of arbitrary violence against Jewish folks and businesses. Simeon and his people felt beaten down, constantly disrespected, and treated as less than human. So Simeon kept coming to the Temple and praying, how long, O Lord? How long before you bring an end to this relentless oppression and injustice under which we are forced to live or be killed?

One day, Simeon sensed that the Spirit of God communicated to him that before Simeon died, God was going to show him personally, the promised Messiah through whom God would bring hope, freedom, liberation for the nation of Israel and for all nations, from the oppression of political and military rulers, and from all the evil powers that terrorize this world. Simeon was profoundly grateful for that promise from God. But Simeon heard that promise from God many years ago. He often wondered; did I really hear that from God? And as he was growing older, he kept asking anxiously, God, how long before you send your Messiah to help us?

Amazingly, on this day, when Simeon saw Mary and Joseph with baby Jesus in the Temple, the Spirit whispered to Simeon, "Look over there. See that child? There is the child who will be the Messiah, the one to bring hope, liberation, Good News, a new beginning for all nations and peoples of the world."

Of course, Simeon immediately went over to talk with Mary and Joseph. As he took baby Jesus in his arms he began to pray with passionate, childlike joy and wonder at what the Spirit was stirring up in him: O Master, Holy God, by seeing this, your Holy Child, you have set me free so I can die in peace. I've seen with my own eyes the person through whom you will bring healing, liberation, hope, not only to us Jews in Israel, but as you told the ancient prophets, this Messiah, this Christ has come to bring healing and hope to all people in the world, all whom you Created. He will bring light, guidance, life-giving direction to all people who feel lost and fearful and hopeless in face of the powers of evil and darkness. And you are sending this, your Messiah/Christ to the whole world through us, your weak, very imperfect and suffering people of Israel. And I get to see and hold Jesus, this God gift of hope for the whole world!

There were probably crowds of people in the Temple that day, who saw just an ordinary poor couple with a new baby. But Simeon saw something of cosmic significance in that baby, because the Spirit of God gave him a special light, or insight to see God at work on a much larger scale than he had ever imagined.

Anna, an 88-year-old widow also came to the temple about the same time. She was a woman of deep prayer. Perhaps she heard her neighbor Simeon exuberantly praying and God's Spirit stirred in her a similar recognition that this child, Jesus, was the Messiah God sent to bring all people and nations hope and liberation from their fears, their despair and from all the forces that controlled and oppressed them.

Notice that God also let Simeon know that there would be difficult times ahead because not everyone would be willing to recognize and receive the gift the Messiah/Christ came to offer. So, Simeon went on to say to Mary and Joseph, this child will lead to both the fall and the rising of many in Israel and in the world. Often Jesus and his way of life will be misunderstood and opposed. The Holy Spirit helped Simeon intuit that Jesus would be attacked by the powerful religious and political elites of that time and be crucified on a cross, and that this young mother would experience deep pain and suffering as she watched the suffering and death of the son God gave her. Through the responses people would make to God's Messiah/Christ, to welcome and follow... or... to reject and oppose this Jesus and his way of healing, liberating love, God would reveal the inner thoughts and priorities in people's lives. But God's project of healing love, liberation, transformation would continue down through history, even during times of hostile responses and destructive attacks. Can you see and feel this great good news in today's gospel?

Now let's take a deep breath and turn our attention to the current reality of our lives. What thoughts and feelings have dominated your mind and heart this past week, with all that has been going on in our nation and world? We seem to be people and a whole world caught in the grip of great anxiety, fear, and grief, and we seem to be reacting with angry and violent thoughts, words, and actions. Many are thinking that evil and darkness are in control and that God's light and love are being snuffed out, like on Good Friday.

And, like the followers of Jesus on Good Friday, and like Simeon before he saw Jesus in the temple, many of us have our doubts. We wonder, is there any hope? How do I handle my fears, my anger, grief, and powerlessness? How is God working in the middle of all these impossible situations or is God also powerless?

Perhaps the noise of the media and our fears are drowning out what Jesus is constantly saying to us, and to his people around the world: Remember, I am right here with you now and always.

Nothing can separate you from my love. I will show you the path of life. That was the word of hope the risen Christ spoke to Mary after his resurrection and that Simeon heard in his time of fear and hopelessness.

Perhaps Christ, the Light of the world is also asking us, underneath all the noise and chaos around and within in us: are you willing to ask me, trust me to guide you through this disorienting time in the world, in our nation, in your personal life?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said to his disciples: “You are the light of the world.” His disciples must have thought, you must be crazy, Jesus! We don’t know what **we’re** doing or what **you** are doing. We’ve got lots of fears and limitations and so little faith, we can’t be lights in the world!

Jesus says, you **ARE** the light of the world because I created you. I breathed my Spirit into you, put my light within you, underneath all your fears and lack of faith and hope and love. I am with you at each moment, and I love you. I want to work in you, shine through you, just as you are, in your situation. Just keep asking for my help, without ceasing. As you keep trusting me enough to share your helplessness and fears with me, keep turning your life over to me and asking for my help and guidance, I’ll help you find a way to live in my light and love, share my light and love with others during this season of your life. I’ll keep shining in and through you, even when you don’t see it or feel it, as you keep turning to me, trusting me, asking for my help and following my guidance day by day, situation by situation.

Let’s close our eyes for a few moments; I want to lead you through a way of prayer that might be helpful to you this week and in this season of our lives. Begin by being aware of what you are thinking and feeling right now...just be aware...

Now in your imagination, picture Jesus, the Light of the world and the hope of the world right here with you, and living within you, and within each of us, and with all of us together as a praying community, and with people praying all over this nation and the world...imagine the Light of Christ shining in and among everyone in the world...In the silence, talk with Jesus about how much you and our nation and world need God’s help, including telling him what you fear most for yourself and for our nation and world...

Now dare to ask Jesus for what you need today and for each day this coming week...

Finally, listen in the silence for any words of encouragement or guidance you hear Jesus speaking to you...

During this week, it might be helpful at the beginning and at the end of each day to reground yourself in God’s goodness and loving kindness and trustworthiness by reading Psalm 23 and praying the Lord’s Prayer.

As our closing prayer, I invite you to raise your index finger and imagine it is a candle, with the light of Christ shining at the tip of your finger and in your heart. Now I invite you to sing with me the familiar song, “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine....let’s sing it together 3 times...

- 1) This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine...
- 2) Christ is the light in me, I’m gonna let it shine...
- 3) Wherever I am each day, I’m gonna let it shine...