

**Sermon for the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple, February 2, 2020**

**The Holy Eucharist**

**By the Reverend Dr. Peter Ross Powell**

*Malachi 3:1–4; Psalm 84:1–6; Hebrews 2:14–18; Luke 2:22–40*

When I was 6 years old, soon after the birth of my sister, I went with my mother to the local parish, The Church of Our Merciful Saviour, where the rector read the office, The Churcing of Women. I think she was required to undergo it to resume service on the Altar Guild. In 1954, women were permitted behind the altar rail only to clean it. That liturgy was rooted in the reason Mary is going to the temple today. The Churcing of Women assumed that childbirth, among other things, made women ritually unclean, and they had to have a special ceremony to become clean and be readmitted to the church. Fortunately, this liturgy does not occur in the current BCP. Giving birth and any number of other conditions do not make women ritually unclean. But they did in the first century and as recently as my childhood.

We're in Matthew's year but this event only occurs in Luke so his gospel is read this morning. The differences between Matthew and Luke in the birth narratives is profound. In Matthew Joseph and Mary live in Bethlehem; Jesus is born on a world stage. Persians, the

Wise Men, visit, Herod slaughters the firstborn, the Holy Innocents, and the family, which resides in Bethlehem, flees its home for Egypt until Herod the Great dies. In other words, Jesus is the new Moses. Fearing to return home they start a new life in Nazareth. In Luke Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth and travel to Bethlehem for a census. They stop, in today's gospel, in Jerusalem to fulfill some cultic duties, the purification of Mary and the presentation/redemption of Jesus as the firstborn son, before returning home to Nazareth. In Luke the story plays out among the outcast and vulnerable rather than on a world stage. Mary receives the annunciation from Gabriel. She visits Elizabeth, whose barrenness was a sign that she was if not cursed then she is to be pitied; but she is now miraculously, in her old age, pregnant with John the Baptist who leaps in the womb at the presence of Jesus in Mary's womb. The proclamation of the birth is made to shepherds, outcasts who could not keep the sabbath or kosher laws. Jesus appears, today, to two old insignificant people, Simeon and Anna. All of this is to remind us that the Gospel is intended for those who are vulnerable not those who are powerful. So Joseph and his family go to the Temple to restore Mary's status and to redeem the baby Jesus. It's what they encounter there that I want us to focus on this morning. They encounter two old people, Simeon and

Anna. I think that all of the old people in the birth narratives of Luke, they include Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna, are intended as a sign that the world order is changing. The future will not be like the past. It will be a radical departure from the power politics of the first century. Clearly that is the message of Simeon and Anna and will be the message of John the Baptist and of course Christ Jesus.

In other words each of the actors in Luke 1 and 2, including the Holy Family, are poor. They are members of the *anawim*. This is the Hebrew designation for those who know they are totally dependent upon God. They have no intrinsic power to save themselves or to work independently in the world. They are dependent upon God.

We know what Simeon said because it's the *Nunc dimittus*. We have no idea what Anna said but her presence is important enough to be mentioned. Only Anna and Jesus are referred to as prophet in Luke-Acts. Her life is characterized by perfection. She was married for the perfect number of years, 7, and her widowhood has been for another perfect number, 7 times 12, the number of tribes in Israel. She is a marker for the importance of Jesus in the gospel to come. We know more details about her life than that of any figure in

Luke except for Jesus. Since we do not know what she said we can only assume her presence was crucial to Luke.

It's not too much to say that women carry the gospel. Luke emphasizes this by pairing a man with a woman in places where Matthew and Mark have only a man. So we have Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna. This pairing of men and women continues throughout the gospel. The exception of course is the end at the crucifixion and empty tomb when the men all fall away.

To focus on the women, a virgin bears a child, and accepts the stigma after she (not Joseph as in Matthew) receives a vision from an angel. A barren woman conceives, Elizabeth, and witnesses to the in-utero Messiah. She is pregnant only now, like Abraham's wife Sarah, to show that this is God's action. Then another woman, Anna, whose name means favored one, daughter of Phanuel, whose name means face of God and from the tribe of Asher, where Elijah worked, proclaims that Jesus has arrived to bring about the redemption of Jerusalem. She looks ahead to the resurrection. The future will not be like the past.

Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, Zechariah, shepherds, Simeon and Anna, not a powerful figure among them yet Simeon foretells that cataclysmic change is begun with the birth of Jesus. Gentiles will worship him. Anna speaks of the redemption of Jerusalem. I submit that the redemption means buying Jerusalem out of its bondage to power. Together they witness to God's preference to work with the powerless. He doesn't work on the powerless he works with them.

Today the Christian Church has lost its way. We have no idea what we are called to do. For too long we have courted power and power no longer needs us, unless of course we're willing to bless that which is clearly naked aggression and call it holy. The powerless characters in Luke's first two chapters point out that if we're ever ready to take up the cross again we will find purpose by working with, and not on, the powerless. God chose to be born out of wedlock, witnessed to by a woman everyone knew was pitied, if not cursed, Elizabeth, because she had no children, proclaimed to the unclean, shepherds, and recognized in the temple not by the high priests, and not by the Pharisees, but by two old people Simeon and Anna. Our calling is to be one with those whom society has rejected. That is where Jesus exercised his calling and it is where we will find him.

Luke is trying to convert us to care for what God cares for.

On March 1, the First Sunday in Lent, we will begin studying Amos. I hope you'll join us for that study. Jesus stands in the line of Amos. Amos pointed out to the powers that were that God cares for the powerless and not for power or the powerful. His life was difficult. Jesus's life ended in crucifixion. His life was difficult. He was crucified by power for siding with the powerless. We are reminded this morning in today's gospel that we find ourselves and our God when we work with, not on, but with the powerless.

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