

Feast of the Presentation  
January 26, 2020  
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Malachi 3:1-4  
Psalm 84:1-6  
Hebrews 2:14-18  
Luke 2:22-40

Today is a high holy day in 21<sup>st</sup> century America. It's Super Bowl LIV. The San Francisco 49ers take on the Kansas City Chiefs. And if you're not much of a football fan, you may still tune in – for the commercials, perhaps, or maybe for the halftime show (this year featuring Jennifer Lopez and Shakira). There's something for everyone. And all of it impressive:

amazing athletes on the field, big men beating up on other big men;  
creative ads on our screens that will amuse, I hope (and/or make a point – if not a sale);  
glamorous and glitzy performances on a very big stage.

All befitting the grand finale of the 100<sup>th</sup> season of the NFL, I suppose.

I say all this not to be critical. For my part, I'll watch the game and the commercials and the halftime show later today.

But I would be remiss if I failed to notice the disconnect between what we will all celebrate later today and what we celebrate here this day this morning. Here we celebrate a feast day in the church's calendar, one of only three holy days that, when they fall on a Sunday, take precedence over anything else. For today is the "Feast of the Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In our gospel this morning, we hear about that presentation: Mary and Joseph present a 40-day-old infant, to the temple priests in Jerusalem. But there is no fanfare. He is not there to impress or convince; he is there to be blessed. His family is in no way exceptional; they are in every way ordinary. They couldn't afford a lamb or a kid for the religious rite for their firstborn son, but allowances were made for poor families ... and so a pair of pigeons would suffice.

This is the 40<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas. And it's Christmas all over for us again here today. On Christmas Eve, we heard how Jesus was laid in a manger – how a "stable place sufficed" for him then, as a pair of pigeons suffice now.

The way Luke tells it – and this is why I am so very mindful of the contrast between a 21<sup>st</sup> century Super Bowl and a 1<sup>st</sup> century rite of dedication – there really was nothing special for anyone to see that day. (And again, that's what makes this a Christmas story.) And yet, Simeon, the old priest, takes one look at this ordinary child of this ordinary family, and declares that he can now die in peace; he has seen the salvation of his people, a light for all the peoples of the earth. Anna, an old prophet, tells everyone who will listen to her about this child.

My friend (former colleague) Sam Portaro says this about Simeon and Anna: "They're a wonderful pair, these two old-timers." And Sam goes on to extol their long lives of faith and

he's curious about their stunning insight. He asks the question: "What did they see that made them carry on so?" And he offers an answer to his own question:

They probably saw nothing, and everything. They saw a family of humble means and demeanor, a young tender mother and her awkward, aging husband – the essence of simplicity. Their meager resources prevented any display of ostentation and their very plainness made them the kind of people who, sadly, leave no impression whatsoever ...

When the infant Jesus was brought, it all came together. In their simplicity and plainness this family represented all that it means to be human – just plain human. They had neither the arrogance that pretends to greatness, nor the brooding hostility that hates the human condition. They were just plain human, neither better nor worse than any of God's creatures, and they came to make an offering.

It was enough for God. Simeon and Anna saw, perhaps for the first time in their long lives, that this offering of humanity was ample to fill the Temple with holiness, and the heart of God with joy ... Those eyes that had seen it all, for the first time saw all that God desired, and it was a little child.<sup>i</sup>

And what do they do? Well, they talk a lot. Praising God. Sharing the good news with others. Yes, they talk a lot, but the first thing Simeon does, I notice, is take the child in his arms. It is a tender moment, easily overlooked.

I'm reminded of a line from one of my favorite Christmas carols, "In the bleak midwinter." The verse sparks the imagination: "Angels and archangels may have gathered there, cherubim and seraphim [may have] thronged the air ..." Ah, but it's the last line I love: "but his mother only, in her maiden bliss, worshiped the beloved with a kiss."

It's more than a little like a sermon that made the rounds on my social media feed this past Christmas season. The preacher, an Episcopal priest named Lonnie Lacy, began it like this:

... one of the most important things  
anyone ever said to me  
when I was still training  
to be a pastor was this:

"Honey, whatever that is you're doin',  
you gotta put it down  
and come hold this baby."

"What?"

"Put it down,  
and come *hold this baby.*"

I was a brand new chaplain-intern  
at Children's National Medical Center  
in Washington, D.C.

I was all of 24 years old,  
just two years out of college.  
I had just arrived and been told  
that the floor I would be covering  
was the neonatal intensive care unit.  
I knew *nothing*.

So there I was on my first day.  
My starchy white shirt.  
My coat and tie.  
My shiny new plastic badge.  
A clipboard in my hands  
and a clueless expression on my face.

I had no idea what I was doing  
as I stood watching those nurses  
tending those babies  
who were fighting for their very lives.

So, I did what any of us would do:  
I tried my best  
to look very busy  
and very important.

By the way,  
if you ever want to look  
very busy and very important  
just carry a clipboard  
and flip the pages up and down  
while you glance up and side to side.  
As a wise man once said,  
"60% of the time it works every time."

But not on *this* nurse.

"Honey," she said,  
"whatever that is you're doin',  
you gotta put it down  
and come hold this baby."

"What?"

*"Put it down,  
and come hold this baby."*

Let the record show,  
this nurse was no  
Virgin Mary meek and mild.

Before I knew it,  
she had physically  
yanked the clipboard  
from my hands,  
spun me around by my shoulders,  
popped me down into a rocking chair,  
and placed *somebody else's* baby  
right into my arms.

"There," she said.  
"If you're gonna be  
that baby's chaplain,  
*that's* what he needs you to do."

"Uh okay," I said,  
"But *what else* am I supposed to do?"

"Nothing!" she said.  
"There's nothing else you *can* do.  
You just *hold* him.  
And *love* him,  
And *pray*." <sup>ii</sup>

And his point, I suppose, is that we spend so much of our time and our energy trying to look busy and important that we fail to appreciate the need to stop trying so hard. We don't need to look busy in order to impress anyone. We certainly don't need to dominate some other team, thinking that's the important thing in life. We don't need to win.

What we need to do – for others and for ourselves ... what the world needs us to do is just stop and hold some babies. Their very existence is enough to fill any temple – any room and every room – with holiness; they are enough to fill the heart of God with joy. <sup>iii</sup>

Fortunately, here at Trinity, we get to hold babies all the time. Yes, literally, we have Artie and Peter/Petey and Thomas/Tommy. We get to hold them. And love them. I delight to take my turn. And I delight to see others do the same. And this morning (at our later service), we'll baptize have Cormac Moses ("Mackey-Mo"!), so I'll get to hold him and love him and pray over him as we baptize him.

And even after the baptism, even as the infants and toddlers among us grow, we get to keep on doing what matters most: stop, put down whatever distracts or preoccupies us, and hold them. Maybe they'll grow too big, so we cannot hold them in our arms quite so literally, but at every baptism we all promise to do all that we can to support them. We promise, in essence, to stop and hold and love and pray for these babies: the tiny ones only a few weeks and months old, as well as the all grown-up ones all around us. Stop and hold and love and pray for one another – each of us children of one God.

Hold one another: hold one another gently; hold one another in love.

And while you're at it, hold yourself too: hold yourself gently, hold yourself in love. For you, too, are a child of God. Your very existence is enough to fill any room and every room with holiness. You are enough to fill the heart of God with joy.

Especially on Super Bowl Sunday, we're encouraged to follow the examples of blessed Simeon and blessed Anna, to look for the sacred where it's so easily overlooked. That's the powerful message of Christmas given us on this, the 40<sup>th</sup> Day of Christmas. On this Feast of the Presentation, we celebrate the eternal Feast of the Incarnation, reminded that holiness has come into the world, pervading all creation, every creature of God.

So take some care as you watch Super Bowl LIV. We are impressed by the powerful. We are happy to be entertained and amused. We are distracted by shiny objects. But if we're not careful, we'll forget that God loves the losers too, that God wallows with us in the doldrums as well, that God abides with all humanity, encouraging us to make room for the sacred among us and within all of us. Put down what doesn't matter, in order to hold fast to what is truly holy, to proclaim joy to the world – to all the world. Put down what doesn't matter, lest we fail to see the holy in the stranger, in one another, and in ourselves.

Merry Christmas, y'all!

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<sup>i</sup> Sam Portaro, "The Presentation of Our Lord," in *Brightest and Best: A Companion to the Lesser Feasts and Fasts* (Cowley Publications, Boston, Massachusetts, 1998), pp. 40-41.

<sup>ii</sup> Lonnie Lacy @ <http://lonnielacy.com/what-we-hold/> -- first shared in late December/early January.

<sup>iii</sup> As an aside, I offer a few words about this past week. There's been a lot of coverage of the death last week of Kobe Bryant, his daughter, and the other seven aboard that helicopter last Sunday morning. Much of the coverage has reminded us of his athletic prowess. Athletes and commentators have talked about "Mamba Mentality" – his drive never to lose, to do whatever he needed to do to be the best and to always be victorious. I share admiration for his basketball skills. I was fortunate enough to live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when Larry Bird was playing for the Boston Celtics. We lived in the Chicago area during some of the years when Michael Jordan played for the Bulls. And I have watching basketball games when Kobe Bryant excelled.

But at the end of the day, I'm not terribly impressed by exemplary athleticism; Kobe offer no example for me on how to play basketball at a level that I could never have aspired to.

What does impress me, however, and I what take to be exemplary is how he loved his daughters – and how he (in spite of his "checkered past") came to become a champion for the WNBA and female athletes. He was exemplary for holding his daughters. And for loving them. And that's something I can aspire to. That's something any of us should aspire to.