

## Light and Glory

### *A sermon for the Feast of the Presentation, 2025*

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*Today's festival concludes the cycle of infancy feasts of Jesus. It demonstrates the faithfulness of the Holy Family, but also reminds us of the profundity of God's grace, the light in the darkness of John's gospel, the promise of redemption, the fulfillment of prophecy, and our own baptismal vows. In all of these ways and more, the glory of God is revealed to a waiting world.*

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#### A RICH FEAST

Today's festival is forgotten and overlooked by many Christians, thought to be obscure or of minor import. When it is remembered, so often it is a note in a long list of the events that demonstrate the faithfulness of the Holy Family in observing the laws of their people. The faithfulness of Jesus and his parents is not something to be dismissed, but this festival's themes of light and grace, its location in the course of the year, its parallels with other important events in the Gospel, and the traditions associated with it have so much to offer us. God has laid out before us a great feast, let's sample at least a few dishes.

Today's feast marks the last of the infancy feasts of Christ. It is no mistake that today marks forty days since Christmas Day, the conclusion of "long Christmas". Among Judeans of the first century, just as on the eighth day a baby boy was to be circumcised and named, about forty days later, a firstborn boy was to be taken to the temple in Jerusalem. There were several rituals to be observed: an offering of thanksgiving for the safe delivery of the child, a ritual of purification for the mother to return to regular religious practice after childbirth, and a gift of money to the temple to redeem the boy from his obligation of service.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Jesus, these events do not go exactly as his parents expect.

On arriving at the temple in quiet and humility, bearing the pauper's offering of two pigeons instead of a lamb, Mary and Joseph seek out a priest to conduct the rites for them. Simeon, a priest, has been led to the temple this day by the

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<sup>1</sup>In Exodus 13:12-15, the giving of the firstborn son of each family to service in the priesthood is described. After the golden calf episode in Deuteronomy 10, this role was removed from all families and given exclusively to the Levites, who had remained loyal to God. (Numbers 3:12-13)

Holy Spirit. Simeon is an impossibly old man who has been assured that he will not die before he sees the Lord's Messiah. On seeing the Holy Family he immediately recognizes that the long-awaited day has come. He takes Jesus from his parents' arms and proclaims both a canticle and a prophecy.

All of this is seen by Anna, who has for decades sought the safety and refuge of the temple's precincts. She is moved by the Spirit to abandon the safety of her constant prayer and goes into the world, proclaiming what she has seen and heard to all who will listen. Not the routine ritual observance that Mary and Joseph expected, but a powerfully Spirit-filled series of events.

#### **GOD'S INVERTED ORDER**

Having events not unfold as expected is, ironically, what we ought to expect when God is involved. At Christmas we remember that the King of kings is born in the humblest of circumstances. On Good Friday we stand in awe at God's willingness to make an ignominious murder the gateway to eternal life. Today, the expected order is turned around in several ways.

Simeon, the ancient priest, holds an infant and realizes that the infant is the Lord's Messiah; Simeon goes to his rest, upheld by the same infant who is resting in his arms.

The Holy Family came to the temple to perform a ritual to redeem their son from his priestly obligation, but they hear Simeon proclaim that their son is the one who will redeem not only all of Israel, but the gentile nations as well.

Mary and Joseph have come to the temple with the sacrifice of the poor. The appointed sacrifice is a lamb, but for those who cannot

afford this, two pigeons will suffice. They believe they have come bearing a lesser offering. Jesus, of course, is himself the lamb who will be the final, perfect sacrifice. Their son liberates not only Simeon from his long watch and Anna from her fear, but every one of us from bondage to sin and death. They have come seeking God's grace in various ways to hear it proclaimed to the world that their infant son is the grace for which all of creation has waited so long.

#### **THE GROWING LIGHT**

God's grace is always given in abundance. More than we need or can possibly contain so that it can spill out of our lives into those around us, the way light from a candle spreads across the room well beyond the wick that holds the flame. We can see this idea spelled out in the arrangement of dates for these festivals about the Christ Child. At Christmas, Jesus is born and the dawn of our salvation begins to break on the horizon. but those who realized what has happened are few in number: Mary, Joseph, and a few shepherds. All told by angelic visitors and drawn to this incredible event, the Light of the World shining in a Bethlehem stable.

At Epiphany, we see the light spread further. The magi are gentiles who have been watching carefully for signs of God's activity. These are not people for whom the prophecies of Israel were given, but they are wise enough to watch for signs of prophetic fulfillment. The stars have revealed to them that God has done something of great importance and they journey to witness it and acknowledge what has happened. The light has spread to all of those who are expecting it and watching for its appearance.

Finally, today, in the heart of Judean religion, Simeon proclaims to the temple that the Mes-

siah has appeared and he can, finally, rest. At the same time, Anna recognizes Jesus for who he is and she flees the safety of the temple's walls, going out into the world for the first time in decades, proclaiming the good news to all with ears to hear. The light is spreading through Jesus's own people and to every citizen, traveler, pilgrim, and wanderer in Jerusalem. The whole world will hear the good news of the Messiah's appearance and will see the glory of his light. We embody this truth by blessing candles and carrying them with us out of the church into the world, remembering the commission given to us at our baptism: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

It is no mistake that this feast takes place in late winter. The days are getting noticeably longer; the light is spreading. We recall the birth of Jesus, Light of the World, in the darkest days of winter. We trace his earthly life and ministry through lengthening days, literally watching the light spread across the world as we do. In the same way, we recall the birth of John the Baptist at the time of the longest days of the year. We hear his call to repentance and to witness to the truth of Jesus Christ and, as we live through the great season of proclamation over the summer, we see mirrored in nature John's prophecy about himself: "He must increase, but I must decrease."<sup>2</sup>

#### **THE GLORY OF GOD'S PEOPLE**

In today's festival we have the true joy of seeing made manifest to all people everywhere the glory of God revealed in Jesus Christ. We remember that God does not follow the patterns marked out by humans but institutes the divine

kingdom which is, most often, the opposite to our plans. We, like Simeon, remember our own experiences of seeing the glory of God and reminders of our redemption. We remember the grace we have experienced and are comforted and reassured. But we are also given candles and told, like Anna, to go forth into the world seeking to serve Christ in all persons. To find the glory of God revealed in the face of neighbour who is dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. And, the infinitely harder task, we are reminded to carry that light and be Christ ourselves, that others might see the glory of God reflected in us.

Thanks be to God for the freeing grace that allows servants to rest, the fearful to preach good news to the world, and even you and I to be lights in the darkness.

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<sup>2</sup>John 3:30