



Sermon for Feast of the Presentation Feb. 2, 2025



St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene
The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Malachi 3:1-4](#)

[Psalm 84](#)

[Hebrews 2:14-18](#)

[Luke 2:22-40](#)

Good morning! Good morning, dear beloved children of God.

Welcome to February. Welcome to Groundhog Day! And welcome to this important feast day of the Church, The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple. This Feast of the Presentation is sort of a final moment in the celebrations related to Christmas, to the birth of Jesus as Emmanuel, God with us, God in this flesh like ours, God incarnate. It is often celebrated by the name, Candlemas – and is a time for thanksgiving and praise for Christ the Light to all people, a celebration of light, and a blessing of candles for people to light in their own homes. Think of it like a “Little Christmas,” or a last whisper of Christmas.

On this day, we remember when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple to be presented and dedicated to the Lord, as faithful Jews did with all their firstborn boys. During this time, forty days after childbirth, Mary could re-enter the temple – so this day was also known in prior centuries as The Purification of Mary. Unfortunately, this carried forward an inheritance of thinking of women as unclean during their periods and after childbirth, related to a fear of blood and its potential relation to disease or infection. It was a principal of safeguarding both the woman's and the community's health, which is not something we have carried forward with clearer insights about our bodies, our world, medicine, and women's health. But we can certainly celebrate Mary's return with Joseph to the community of faith and to entering holy ground together with their newborn son.

Mary and Joseph brought with them animals to offer as a sacrifice of thanksgiving for safe childbirth and for dedicating their son Jesus to the Lord. The offering they brought was the most affordable option noted in the Torah – not a sheep or goat, but two turtledoves or pigeons. You know the song! “Two turtledoves.” It was the offering they could afford. So, this helps us recognize that Joseph and Mary were not wealthy and were probably just getting by.

While they are there among many people coming and going with their own offerings and participating in different prayers, they meet Simeon and Anna, two people who have dedicated their lives to prayer and to being in God's presence with others in the temple.

Simeon's prayer as he held Jesus in his arms became a prayer for Christians at the end of the day, and it is part of our Evening Prayer service in our *Book of Common Prayer*.

The scriptures we heard today take us inside the deeper spiritual reality of Jesus entering the temple. They remind us of how profound and powerful and lifechanging it is for Jesus to enter any space with us – and how profound and lifechanging it is later in the Gospels, whenever Jesus interacts with people in his ministry as an adult.

We hear from the prophet Malachi those words that Handel made sure to include in his oratorio, *The Messiah*. "Who can endure the day of is coming? For he is like a refiner's fire." Emmanuel, God with us, is brought into the temple that is already the house of God's presence among the Jewish people – and it is like fire meeting fire, already joined. God is like fire – but a fire that refines, purges, cleanses, purifying those it touches until they present their offerings in righteousness, free of any guile or double standards or manipulations of circumstances for their own gain, purely focused on bringing themselves and others into direct and open relationship with the fire, the light, the life-source that is God.

Part of this fiery refinement is the centering and ordering of our passions, our desires, our motivations, our attachments. In this fiery refinement, we learn truly to love God with all our being, wanting most of all to be close to God. We move more and more toward our heart's deepest desire becoming what we sang in the hymn that is based on Psalm 84. It is the verse that I invited you to pray this whole week as part of your breathing throughout the day: "How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts." "How dear to me is your dwelling! My soul has a desire and longing for the course of the Lord... For one day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room." One day with you in this holy place, among your people, is better than any of my own private time alone.

Just this week, I had a chance to visit one of our longtime members who has not been able to come to church because of limitations to transportation. Many of you know and remember Barbara Campbell, who sang in the choir for years and years. We had the sweetest visit, and shared time in prayer and in receiving holy communion together. Throughout our visit, Barbara began to cry in gratitude and in sad yearning for this place. Barbara's deep yearning is to come to church, to sing and pray, to be with us again.

I think this is part of what was in the heart of Simeon and Anna, and what many of us feel in our hearts that draws us here together.

Such deep desire, yearning, and attachment is built from trust. Do we trust in God? Is our trust to be in God's enfolding embrace deep enough that we yearn for God's presence?

That is what draws us together – to be in God’s loving presence together, to hear God’s word and wisdom come to us through scriptures, to open our hearts to God and one another, to be fed by God’s promised presence through Christ in the bread and wine we share, to be enriched and strengthened by each other as we practice what it means to follow Jesus. That is what we are doing, week after week after week.

But let’s be clear. This Feast of the Presentation and the scriptures we heard don’t just point us to the temple, a building, as the holy place of God’s dwelling. What we heard from that wonderful letter to the Hebrews is the closeness that God desires with humanity in order to love us and redeem us and heal us. The holy place of God in Jesus becomes human nature itself. In Jesus, God enters our human nature itself as a temple – THIS flesh and blood, just like ours.

Two natures, forever intertwined as one – human and divine in the temple of each other’s presence and being.

How lovely is thy dwelling place.

This intertwining, this unifying with what makes us us, so that God incarnate might deliver us from what has come to overshadow and overpower us in our lives – the reality of death that we all must face. As it says in Hebrews, “so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.” The devil is claimed here to hold the **power** of death – and that power is fear. We are ensnared, not by death, but by the ways death has power over us through the paths that forces of evil use to sow and cultivate fear in us.

Christ did not come to help angels. Christ came to help us. US. And, to help us, Christ became one of us – like us in every way.

This is the ultimate form of empathy. In Christ Jesus, God has felt and feels all that we feel, has experienced and experiences all that we experience, and is and always will be our merciful and faithful high priest.

This one, born to parents barely getting by. This one, born among a people who had long lost their glow and sense of rising power in the world, who were now vassals in an empire that did not value them. This one, born in a time of despair, of weariness, and sense of inevitability, of rising anger and periodic revolt, of deep yearning in the midst of a world where cruelty was a constant threat by those who had the upper hand.

Among the subjugated Jews of that age were people like Simeon, “looking and yearning for the consolation of Israel.” Simeon and Anna came to the temple with their deep yearning. Each of them a temple, each experiencing within them the closeness of the Holy Spirit guiding them.

In the midst of the gathering of people there, they each find themselves drawn close to the child brought by Mary and Joseph. And they speak, with deep thanks to God, from their hearts.

“My eyes have seen your salvation.”

“A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

“Destined for the falling and rising of many.”

“A sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.”

“A sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

These are not all comfy words!

My eyes have seen your salvation. I have seen you in your holy temple – this body in my arms. I have seen the light you are, the light you are bringing. I have seen how your light will be resisted, how your light will show people for who they really are. Your salvation is a way of truth, a way of light, a way of sorrow. And the pains you experience, Oh Emmanuel, will be pains and sorrows that your parents will also feel.

As we heard last week, Jesus begins his life work with a proclamation of purpose:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, he has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” All sense the movement of the Holy Spirit as he reads and then sits down. But then, the gathered community does not know what to do with the movement of the Spirit in their midst that Jesus has awakened. They try to put Jesus back in his place that fits for them and their view of the world. And when Jesus says some awkward truths, that God may actually care about and sometimes favor foreigners, they get offended and seek to get rid of him. A different spirit than the Holy Spirit has a grip on them.

Which spirit do you yearn for? Which spirit do you listen to?

Are you prepared more to fear, or to love? Are you prepared more to judge, or to show mercy? Are you seeking to be the best, or to be a good neighbor? What does the refining fire of Christ’s light reveal in you?

Beloved ones, you are in the presence of the Lord. God has drawn near. The dwelling place of God is here. This place. This town. Next to you in each person here. You – your own body and mind and heart.

What is the state of your temple? You are a dwelling for Christ. Are you prepared to meet and welcome the Lord?