

FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION February 2, 2014

Theme: Hidden in Plain View

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I feel certain you have found yourself in the situation where you were engaged in a conversation with someone about a particular subject but before long you found yourselves vigorously discussing an entirely different subject and you have no idea how you got from here to there!

That's what I think maybe happened to Luke when he was writing today's Gospel passage.

He began by telling us how Mary and Joseph went to the Temple in Jerusalem to present their first born son to the Lord, to purify Mary after childbirth and to offer two turtledoves in sacrifice – all according to the Law of Moses.

But as he goes on the child is never presented; Mary is not purified; and the doves never get sacrificed.

Instead Luke's entire interest shifts to an old man and an old woman who happen to wander onto the scene.

Either Luke got distracted from what he want to write about, or he quite deliberately and cleverly shifted our attention from performance of required religious rituals to the from-the-heart faith of a tried-and-true old coot and old crone.

For as excellent a writer as he proves to be elsewhere in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, my money is in the latter explanation.

Instead of subjecting this first readers -- who like us were not familiar with or particularly interested in Jewish ritual traditions -- to descriptions of priests lifting up the child Jesus to God or praying over Mary with incantations or, worst of all, chopping up and a bloody

gutting of the turtledoves and ceremonially placing them on the burning altar of sacrifice, Luke deliberately ignores all this.

Instead, he has us focus first on a kind of cooky old man and then a pious old woman.

Simeon is said to be simply a man from Jerusalem: **“righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.”**

I think we should note that Simeon is not a priest or a scribe, not a Pharisee or anybody like that: just a good, holy, old man.

But this good, holy, old man had the crazy idea (here, everybody roll your eyes the way Simeon’s children and friends must have done!) that God wasn’t going to let him die until he had seen the Messiah:

Taking the infant Jesus in his hands (note we didn’t see any temple priest get to do this) Simeon chants that lovely canticle:

**“Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace,
According to your word.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
Which you have prepared in the sight of all the peoples,
A light of revelation to the Gentiles,
And the glory of your people Israel.”**

As he handed the child back to them, old man Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph but he also warned them that this child would be the source of joy and sorrow for many, including the two of them.

And then there was Anna: every church, synagogue, mosque or religious house has an Anna or two.

A good and holy widow: first one there when the building opens and last one there when it is locked; never misses a service; she sees everything and hears everything and as a result a prayer list a mile long.

She never said a word out loud in Luke's account.

But you can bet to everyone who would listen she whispered her amazing secrets about this child.

The long expected one finally comes to the Temple, and there is no majestic high priest in stunning vesture with a long retinue of hierarchs to meet him, to conduct elaborate and profound rituals over him.

No, there is an old man and an old woman, both lay people, both honed and made holy by years of faithfully living their trust and hope in their God.

The old man gets to hold the baby and joyously sings his simple little hymn of praise to his promise-keeping God.

The old woman whispers the gossip of God's goodness.

Luke took what could have been yet another story of empty religious ritual and clerical pomposity and turned it on its head.

What we have instead is a story of religion coming from the heart of God's people.

The Messiah being welcomed in the Temple by two of God's faithful ones, two who have endured and kept the faith, two who gave witness in the name of all God's holy people.

As a bit of postscript, allow me to add that as the number of clergy dries up in the Churches, the role of laymen and women is going to become more and more crucial in the future of Christianity.

You Simeons and Annas will be the ones to help form whatever the church will look like in years to come.

Certainly it will look very different than it does today when you will not have anywhere near the number or kind of priests you have today.

Finally, the story told us both Simeon and Anna were well advanced in years.

Perhaps that should also tell us something about where we should also be looking for guidance and direction for the future: namely to some of our oldest, most faithful members.

I'm not suggesting our Simeons and Annas have answers for the future.

What they do have is experience: they know what it took to remain faithful, to become holy in the midst of difficult and challenging times.

Perhaps we should be doing a much better job of listening to their stories and picking their brains before it is too late.