

4 Epiphany, The Presentation

February 2, 2020

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Luke's

Malachi 3:1-4 Psalm 84:1-6 Hebrews 2:14-18

Luke 2:22-40

Today's readings all focus on the themes of symbols, ritual and blessing.

In the OT lesson, the prophet Malachi is frustrated with temple priests who corrupt worship and mislead the people. Malachi records God saying, "I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." This prophecy appears to foretell Jesus being dedicated to God at the temple. For Malachi, God's presence among us is made known in the temple.

Psalm 84 is a beautiful poem about the complete joy that is felt simply by being in God's presence, which is most perfect, and most intimately found, in the Temple. Hebrew theology understood the Temple in Jerusalem to be the closest point on earth to heaven. The holy of holies of the Temple was the reflection of God's heavenly court. The ark of the covenant, which was placed in the holy of holies, was the reflection of God's heavenly throne. The psalmist says, "How dear to me is your dwelling", "Happy are they who dwell in your house", "Happy are the people whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way". Even being in travel towards God's Temple brings happiness, because that travel is a symbol of the centering and direction of all of life.

In 70 AD the Jerusalem temple was destroyed by the Romans, and never rebuilt. Christians do not look to a building as the dwelling place of God because we know that, "When two or three are gathered together in Christ's name, he is in the midst of them." (Matt 18:20) So our gathering here makes this God's dwelling place. Our travel to this church building is like the pilgrimage the psalmist writes about – and it isn't just a physical journey to God's place, but a theological journey too.

Temple worship was the center for ritual for Mary and Joseph, and Simeon and Anna; it provided the framework for blessings to happen. Their faithfulness to God is revealed by their visit to the temple on the day we commemorate today. Mary and Joseph came as Jewish law instructed them, to present their newborn son for circumcision, and for Mary to be ritually purified after having delivered her baby.

Ritual actions were, and are, about celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary events of life. As a Jew, Jesus was marked as a member of God's chosen people. As Christians we use the ordinary symbols of water, and bread and wine, to mark us. These symbols communicate deep truths about new life in Jesus, and unity with Jesus in the offering of himself to God. Our partaking in Holy Eucharist is about offering of ourselves, along with Christ, to God.

There are lots of ways we at St. Luke's celebrate the presence of God in the ordinary.

Pet blessings – aren't just about animals being pets, but about their being God's creatures, gifts of love from God.

Leave-taking liturgy – the people we pray for are not just 'members', but part of our faith community, our family.

Blessing of vestments, altar cloths – makes a statement that these aren't just pieces of cloth. They are symbols that help us focus on this time and space being set aside for the holy purpose of acknowledging God in our lives.

Candles are not just sources of light, but represent the light of Christ in our lives; guiding us and empowering us to be more than we could be without God in our lives.

Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to be blessed, but Jesus was actually the one to bring blessing to the whole world. As Simeon said in his blessing that we call the Nunc Dimittis, this child "is a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

Mary came to be purified, but is celebrated as the human most pure of us all, worthy enough to be the Theotikos, the Mother of God.

The aged prophets Simeon and Anna came to the Temple to find the Messiah, but they found the source of salvation for the whole world. All of these experiences are blessings brought to those who come looking for the presence of God in the ordinary.

There is a familiar, routine pattern of our Sunday worship; that is, of our ritual. I suggest that a way to think of this routine is that it is the regular heartbeat of the church. Today's lessons describe the important role of that heartbeat, that ritual, as a source of blessing. The challenge to us is to make sure that our ritual stays fresh and alive, and provides meaningful celebration of God's presence in the ordinary events of our lives; in our celebration of new babies, in acknowledging sisters and brothers in Christ who move away (Bob and Dee), or are separated from us with illness (1/4 of our preschool now) or injury (Janet Brians) or travel (James); and to acknowledge special ministries of all kinds. I'll keep my attention on ways to incorporate our normal lives into liturgical action; and I welcome your thoughts on new ways to keep our ritual alive and meaningful. But I also offer you a challenge; to look with a keen eye for the presence of God in the ordinary events of life. Then watch for the blessing of happiness that follows. Amen.