

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the Feast of

The Presentation

February 2

RCL



Malachi 3:1-4

Psalm 84

Luke 2:22-40

The Collect

Almighty and everliving God, we humbly pray that, as your only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple, so we may be presented to you with pure and clean hearts by Jesus Christ our Lord; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Malachi 3:1-4

Thus says the Lord, See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight – indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.

Psalm 84 Page 707, BCP

Quam dilecta!

- 1 How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts!
My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.
- 2 The sparrow has found her a house
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young;
by the side of your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.
- 3 Happy are they who dwell in your house!
they will always be praising you.
- 4 Happy are the people whose strength is in you!
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.
- 5 Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs,
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.
- 6 They will climb from height to height,
and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.
- 7 LORD God of hosts, hear my prayer;
hearken, O God of Jacob.
- 8 Behold our defender, O God;
and look upon the face of your Anointed.
- 9 For one day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room,
and to stand at the threshold of the house of my God
than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.
- 10 For the LORD God is both sun and shield;
he will give grace and glory;
- 11 No good thing will the LORD withhold
from those who walk with integrity.
- 12 O LORD of hosts,
happy are they who put their trust in you!

Luke 2:22-40

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of

the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

SERMON

In view of the handsome and athletic man I grew into, it might be hard for you to believe that as a youth, I was awkward, but it is so. I was the last kid to be chosen for sides in any sport. I was a triple threat. I couldn't run, I couldn't hit and I couldn't throw. Choosing up sides had everything to do with "who has to take him" and nothing to do with "we want him." The experience left me sympathetic to the excluded, the unwanted, the by-passed and made me sensitive to the forces in our communities which exclude people.

A lot of our grown-up activities are a form of choosing up sides. When we choose up sides, what we're really doing is deciding who to include within our circle of love and compassion — our community. The world is full of bad stuff happening to people. We fear that if we extend our circle of love and compassion to all of them, we'd be paralyzed, for there is no end to it. Wikipedia reports casualty figures from the Syrian civil war in these terms:

By late December 2013, the opposition activist group Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) reported the number of children killed in the conflict had risen to 7,014, while at the same time 4,695 women were also killed. According to the UN, 6,561 children were killed by mid-June 2013. The Oxford Research Group said that a total of 11,420 children had been killed in the conflict by late November 2013.

I can't wrap my mind around 11,000 dead kids or 4,700 dead women. I can acknowledge it as a number, but I'm not driven to take food to the families who have lost children in the same way I would be if it were someone within my circle of love and compassion. Why can I not extend my compassion to Syria?

Closer to home, the Gallup Poll released its list of the most miserable places to live in 2013. Great news. We're not the most miserable place in the country anymore. Charleston is. We're now number 2 on the misery scale. Surely the miserable people in our town are within my circle of love and compassion? Maybe not. I just don't perceive our area as par-

ticularly miserable. What am I missing? Has my relative financial comfort blinded me to local misery? Maybe.

On Monday I was at the Chapel of St. Arbuck's. I noticed a beggar at the intersection of Winchester and the bridge. It was colder than a well-digger's belt buckle out there and he was shivering with the cold. I saw a woman roll down her window to give him some cash. The more I watched the more I saw him as included in my circle of love and compassion. I determined to buy him some breakfast.

I went to the counter and ordered him a nice sausage and egg sandwich and a coffee. I got the coffee first, and turned to look out the window. The light had turned red for Winchester, and the Ashland Police Department shift commander's SUV was stopped at the light. No beggar to be seen, anywhere. "Well, maybe traffic is blocking my view", I thought as I collected his sandwich. When I looked again, traffic was moving, but he clearly was no longer there. In a few seconds, he emerged from under the bridge on the other

side. Clearly, he did not want a meeting with the APD shift commander and had hidden under the bridge. Before I could take him his breakfast, though, I watched him shoulder his pack and start down Winchester, turn into the liquor store and he was gone.

There's nothing surprising about that. We all know people who suffer from alcoholism. What I found so devastating was the way in which the light of my compassion for him winked out as he walked in the door of the liquor store. Suddenly his misery wasn't something I had compassion for. It had become a moral issue for me, someplace down in the dark parts of my soul. That is my sin, and I humbly confess it before you.

The Dalai Lama teaches that the first beneficiary of compassion is yourself. It is a good teaching. Jesus taught us to love your neighbor as ourselves. It is the same concept. When we exclude our neighbor from our circle of compassion, when we make a moral issue of another's poverty or illness,

we damage our very souls. Remember Anthony deMello's story:

The Master and a disciple came upon a blind man sitting on the sidewalk, begging. Said the Master, "Give the man an alms."

The disciple dropped a coin in the beggar's hat. Said the Master, "You should have touched your hat as a mark of respect."

"Why?" asked the disciple.

"One always should when one gives an alms."

"But the man was blind."

"You never know," said the Master. "He may have been a fraud."

Our Gospel text today is called the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple, and it's quite possible that you are having trouble connecting that account with a beggar at 12th and Winchester, so let me help you a bit. Both stories are about people who have been excluded from a circle, the beggar because of his alcoholism and Mary because she had given birth, an event which, in the law of Moses, renders a woman

ritually unclean.

Luke seems to be unfamiliar with the details of Torah because he tells us that the Holy Family was in Jerusalem for “their” purification after the birth of Jesus. This is quite wrong; the purification was for Mary, not Jesus. Leviticus 12:

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean for seven days; ...

⁴Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. ...

In the thinking of the ancient Israelites, giving birth was an event that excluded a woman from worship. I don't have the first idea why. Perhaps the women came up with it to give themselves some space after the rigors of childbirth. Whatever the reason, women were excluded from worship until their purification was complete, which required the sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon or turtle-dove after which she could once again worship God in the way of her people.

⁶ When the days of her purification are completed,

whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt-offering, and a pigeon or a turtle-dove for a sin-offering. ⁷He shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female.

What if she had not the ability to buy a lamb? Would she then be forever excluded from worship? No. The law of Moses anticipated that this would happen, that there would be those folks who were too poor to sponsor a sacrifice of this magnitude.

⁸If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtle-doves or two pigeons, one for a burnt-offering and the other for a sin-offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean.¹

This is exactly what Luke reports the Holy Family did:

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn

¹ Leviticus 12:1-8

male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

This is how we know that Mary and Joseph were poor people. They couldn’t afford a lamb for Mary’s purification. The provision of a cheaper, yet still perfectly acceptable, sacrifice is the law of Moses saying, “Even though you have not the resources you need, yet may you still worship God, no matter how little you have.”

I suppose we could view this as God having a sale for poor people, but, really, how many dead pigeons does God actually require? This ritual isn’t for God’s benefit, it is for the benefit of the people, welding them back into a community. So...what sort of ritual would we need to weld the beggar at 12th and Winchester back into community with moralizing me? What sort of liturgy could we turn to to assist us in welcoming the excluded, the unwanted, the by-passed back into our circle of community?

Perhaps, like me, you don't perceive our little town to be all that miserable. Perhaps, like me, your perceptions, colored by your relative comfort and the familiarity of this place called "home", don't allow you to see the suffering which does exist here. We often see what we want to see. But there is suffering here. Those young people who pour your coffee at the drive-through suffer because they are paid a wage they cannot live on. The American dream is that if you work hard, your community will grant you a path to success. The American reality is that no matter how hard they work, there is no path to success. The greatest predictor of a life of grinding poverty is being born into a family grinding in poverty. It is as if the law of Moses had said, "Bring a lamb. If you can't afford a lamb, it's your fault for not working hard enough."

It is good to do outreach to the poor, and to lessen their suffering. It is better to find ways to re-integrate those who suffer, the excluded, the unwanted, the by-passed, back into the circle of our community. Dr. King, in his "Address at the

Religious Leaders Conference” in Washington on May 11, 1959 said

A religion true to its nature must also be concerned about man’s social conditions...Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them, and the social conditions that cripple them is a dry-as-dust religion.

It’s striking to me how little Jesus had to say about what you need to do to get to heaven, and how much He had to say about including others within your circle of love and compassion. Those of us who proudly proclaim ourselves as disciples of Christ have an obligation to follow His teaching. That’s not easy, church, and it’s not fun. Malachi wrote:

For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness.

Ask any lump of silver ore. Getting refined is not a pleasant thing. It is, however, the very thing to which all disciples

of Christ are called.

AMEN

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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