

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they 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 turtle-doves 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 for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped 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.

I know I already wished you Happy New Year at the beginning of December, because the liturgical year of Christian Church began with Advent. Still, as we gather in worship on this last Sunday, the last day of Year 2023, we have an opportunity to listen to the Scripture and ponder what invitation there might be from God for our spiritual journey in the coming year.

Jesus has been born, the shepherds had come and gone, and now, Mary and Joseph, the brand-new parents, took the brand-new baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem. There they encountered two very old people, Simeon and Anna.

For Mary and Joseph, their life as parents had just begun. They found themselves entrusted with the responsibility to care for this child who arrived, well, quite unexpectedly, and everything that had unfolded, from the visit by Angel Gabriel who brought Mary the “news,” to

the visit by the shepherds who told them of the birth of the Messiah, has been amazing. Mary, especially, had been pondering all these things in her heart.

Now in the Temple, the new meets the old. The new parents are still walking in the mystery of their new parenthood, but the old, faithful Simeon, had actually been expecting the baby. He takes Jesus into his arms and praises for God; God's promise of salvation to all has been fulfilled. Simeon's vocation was to wait faithfully for the coming of Christ and bear witness, and to share his knowledge of God's propose in Christ to the new generation; he tells Mary what she has been pondering about, who this child is and what he is destined for. Again, the parents are amazed.

In the Temple, the lives of two generations of God's faithful servants touch, bringing revelation to the new generation and consolation and fulfillment of promise for the old.

But they didn't just bump into each other by chance in the crowded Temple. They were brought together because of their faithfulness, expressed in concrete action, which is their spiritual practice. On the part of the new parents, their faithfulness was expressed in their doing what the Law of Moses, the Torah, required of new parents, including the purification of the mother after giving birth and offering the sacrifice of a lamb, or two turtle doves if you had limited means, for the redemption of the first-born son who was to be dedicated to God. They had come to the Temple to practice these rituals. On the part of the old Simeon, it was his faithfulness that enabled him to keep watch for the coming of the Messiah for all those years, and in faith Simeon followed the Spirit who guided him to the Temple that day.

The Law and the Spirit; they shaped their spiritual practice in their life of faith. But these are arcane rituals and way of life, what invitation, let alone relevance, could there possibly be for us modern Christians, you might ask. It is the same Spirit that guided Simeon that guides us today, and it is still the same God who gifted the Law to God's people out of love for them.

The Law of the Lord was and has always meant to be God's loving, life-giving gift for the people. Following the law their God gave them and so to obey God was the way the people responded to God in trust, and there formed a divine-human relationship. The law undergirded what God wished for the human relationships and society: love, mercy, justice, peace--- all necessary ingredients for rich and abundant human life in a healthy and thriving community.

Law often translated into ritual, so doing the ritual was the people's way of keeping the trusting relationship with God. Mary and Joseph committed themselves to the rituals of the faith

because they were the language of their faith, their way of living in active relationship with God who provided them with the rituals as a means of sustaining their relationship. For them, ritual was not just an empty motion to check off the box. It was a meaningful spiritual practice, that deepened their relationship with God and revealed God's purpose for them.

That said, all too easily, we forget the Divine-human relationship which filled the rituals with meaning, and only the empty shell of the act of ritual remained. Worse yet, legal requirements could easily turn legalistic and become a weapon for judgment, marginalization, and exclusion, which are far from God's life-giving intention behind the Law of the Lord. Jesus, who came to fulfill the Law, would later condemn such abuse of the Law.

I think we know from our own experience how a ritual, once meaningful, can lose its function as an expression of something beyond the acts. You may know some people decided to forgo wedding, because the ritual of wedding has become so commercialized and social expectations as to its size, style and cost have stripped it of its original function of marking the occasion as something sacred to be blessed in the community. Another grand ritual of our days is Christmas gift giving. Whatever the original practice was meant to convey, it can be a frenetic last minute shopping spree, driven not by the thoughts and emotions the gift is to convey but by a sense of obligation and social expectation. The act involved in the ritual is the same, but it is the presence or absence of the mindfulness that makes ritual retain its meaning.

As we start a new year, we have an opportunity to renew our commitment to spiritual practice, mindfully living into it, as Mary and Joseph committed to the rituals of faith. As Christians, we don't practice the rituals provided in the Law of Moses, so what are our spiritual practice? For Christians, Jesus is the Spirit of Law embodied in flesh, who came to dwell among us, so that we can follow him and learn from him, to live in relationship with God and with one another as he taught us.

And just as it was in the Temple that the meaning of the shared spiritual journey of the old and the new generations were revealed, it is in the church, in the body of Christ, which is our spiritual Temple, the meaning of our spiritual journey is deepened. Many people have shared with me that they feel closest to God when they are in nature, experiencing the magnificent beauty and standing in awe of God's creation. That is good. It certainly leads us to praise God the Creator of this amazing universe. And many people are quite content to have their

spirituality contained in the inner sanctuary of their own hearts, communing with God in solitude. Sometime that is what's needed when our lives are filled with too many noises.

But just as the new parents doing their religious ritual for Jesus and the old Simeon was led by the Spirit to the temple, it is in the community of the faithful, we come to a deeper awareness of our vocation, our place in God's larger purpose.

Going to church, in our modern and increasingly secular world, has come to be regarded, even mocked, as a moral question, as in "oh, she is a good, church-going Christian." as if regular attendance at worship made one "good," which, I'm sorry to tell you, does not. Rather, though we may not think of "going to church" as a ritual, taking part in corporate worship, is a spiritual practice; the entire Psalm 148 calls us to praise God as a community of God's creation, as a grateful response to the Creator God, who continues to use each one of us in God's amazing purpose for the world, though we are, like a brand-new parent, often clueless. We need the encounter with others who can see what God is doing in and through our lives. One place that exists for that very purpose, is the church.

Going to church, when it is done mindfully as a spiritual practice, is a ritual that allows us to commune with the Divine spirit, and she will always nudge us outward to serve others. Coming from a pastor, at the threshold of a new year, this may sound like a pitch to get people to come to church, often, to keep the attendance number up, etc., but truly, it is my sincere hope and prayer, that in the new year, our church continues to be the place of spiritual nurture, where God is praised and worshipped and the people gather together as spiritual practice, to discern what God is calling us to be and do, individually and as a church community, in the larger purpose of God for the world, and may we be amazed to learn, like Mary. Happy New Year.