
Homily

The Rev. Buddy Crawford
The Cathedral of St. Philip
Atlanta, Georgia
February 7, 2010
Feast of the Presentation

The Feast of the Presentation, or Candlemas, falls at the midpoint between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, the midpoint between Christmas and the beginning of Holy Week and the passion of Christ. Candlemas comes at a time of transition; the days are getting longer. Winter will soon give way to spring. And the typical human response to transitions of all sorts is to make meaning of them through rituals.

This week in rituals across the country people gathered as Punxsutawney and other groundhogs were coaxed out of their homes to see if they observed their shadows, or not. The tradition of Groundhog Day is in fact tied to the older tradition of Candlemas, when sunshine or rain on the feast indicated whether Winter would be long or shortened.

Today is one of the biggest cultural rituals in the US, the Super Bowl, after the game is over football season will come to an end. The Super Bowl can hardly go unnoticed, even if you are not a fan of the Saints or the Colts. Television programs and commercials continually remind us about this day. For several weeks, grocery store displays have been pushing food and snacks and drinks. For football aficionados the preparations for tonight almost parallel those of Thanksgiving dinner as friends and family gather to share food and hospitality while watching the game.

But this afternoon we gather to observe a different ritual. One in which we bless and light candles, candles that illumined our steps with their warm glow as we moved into this sacred space to hear one more story of the Epiphany...God's manifestation to the world. Our actions prepare the path for us to open our hearts and minds to God and to find meaning in our sacred story.

The gospel reading from Luke describes the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the purification of Mary, ritual observances required under the laws of Torah. But the real crux of the story centers on the characters of Simeon and Anna as they encounter the holy family in the temple. Simeon and Anna's lives have been shaped and formed by living into the rituals of the temple...worshiping and praying in preparation and anticipation of this day. They have been faithful and hopeful in the face of Roman oppression and degradation that rages just outside the temple. These two people embody the longing and hope of Israel that God will keep his promise by sending the anointed one to bring redemption and peace for his chosen people.

Through prayer, God reveals to Simeon that the day he has hoped for has come, and he goes to the temple finding Mary, Joseph, and Jesus there to fulfill their religious obligations. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Simeon takes Jesus in his arms, praising God with the words we call the Nunc Dimittis, sung by the choir at the beginning of our service. My eyes have seen your salvation prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the nations, Seeing the hope that he has waited for incarnate in the infant Jesus is enough and Simeon who is now ready to depart in the peace knowing that God's word has been fulfilled.

Anna has a different reaction altogether. Having lived her long life with fasting and prayer in the temple precincts, she is also ready to see God's redeemer. But Anna is not ready to depart, she cannot contain this knowledge. Instead, at 84, she becomes an evangelist telling everyone she can about the promised redeemer, the one coming to bring redemption and reconciliation to the human family. Anna uses her voice to make a way for those who will listen to see God doing something new,

Earlier this week, about 60 clergy of the diocese met with our bishops in a pre-Lenten retreat. In Bishop Whitmore's sermon he gave us his definition of prophecy, saying that prophecy is when we look through the eyes of God and see not what is, but what can be. With the eyes of prophets both Simeon and Anna confirm and rejoice in the possibility of who Jesus will be and what Jesus will accomplish.

I believe all people of faith are called to see with prophetic eyes. During the German occupation of Holland a young woman began to see her world through the eyes of God. Etty Hillesum and her family were forced to enter the Jewish camp at Westerbork where she worked for the Jewish Council. Etty was not a religiously observant Jew nor was she conventional in any other way. Etty may be characterized as a free spirit, a Bohemian. From 1941 to 1943 she recounts in her diaries and letters her experiences of encountering God in the most horrific and dehumanizing circumstances imaginable.

While in the ghetto in Westerbork, Etty spent much of her time helping families find housing, food, and employment. In the face of this tragedy, when many were becoming skeptical about God and religion, Etty was becoming more conscious of God. She began to look at her life in the camp through the eyes of God - to see what could be. Knowing that the camp at Westerbork was only a holding place for Jews destined for Germany, did not dissuade Etty from affirming life and the presence of God there.

Before being sent to Auschwitz, where she was to die with most of her family in the gas chambers, Etty wrote to a friend describing her life as having become "an uninterrupted dialogue with God", saying that her vocation in the camp was not only to proclaim God, but to commend God to the hearts of others." I don't know if she called her dialogue prayer or thought of it as ritual, but I do know that it shaped her life in the camp. Etty said that one must not only commend God to others, "one must clear the path toward [God] in them." Clearing the path was not done through words alone; clearing the path was accomplished through real, tangible acts performed on behalf of others. Like Simeon and Anna, Etty consciously decided how she would occupy her place in the difficult times, seeing through the eyes of God and finding peace in her relationship with God.

On seeing the infant Christ, Anna was compelled to tell of him to everyone she met. We have the advantage of knowing the rest of the story of Jesus' life. And knowing the full story of his life compels us to do more than simply tell it to others. Like Anna and Simeon and Etty, we must decide how we will occupy the space that God has given us. Jesus' life is exemplified in his care of the poor and the outcast, of living in the margins with those held in bondage by circumstances beyond their control. Our call in baptism is to clear the way for others to come to God through tangible means, our call is to follow Jesus to the margins and to release the captives.

Few of us will find ourselves in as terrible a situation as Etty. But we are often in the midst of suffering and pain, in our families, churches, and communities. Divorce, addiction, illness, unemployment, and death are some of the common tragedies that are part of our existence. Will we choose to occupy our space by reaching out with compassion and grace to those in need of love and support? By being available to listen to another's story, connecting it to the story of faith and by lending a helping hand - a casserole, a job, a visit, a little money, a comforting hug, whatever we have that we can share.

We bore light into this sacred space to participate in story and ritual, eating and drinking the sacred meal that nourishes us to participate in the life that God calls us to, we go out into God's sacred world, bearing in our bodies the light and story of Jesus and creating a path for others to know God's presence, the one who provides the light that enlightens all the nations. Amen.

Comments? Contact The Rev. Buddy Crawford at: bcrawford@stphilipscathedral.org.

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