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## *The Presentation of Gridlock and Blessing*

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**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**The Feast of The Presentation**

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
According to your word.  
Lord, you now have set your servant free,  
To go in peace as you have promised.  
(Luke 2:29, twice)*

Simeon had been waiting a long time. He was one of the elders of Jerusalem long ago, two thousand years ago, and he was waiting. Sometimes, his waiting must have seemed fruitless and unbearable—maybe, maybe, like being stuck in an agonizing traffic jam of icy gridlock in Atlanta on Tuesday, January 28. Simeon was waiting for release. He was waiting to be set free. He was waiting for peace, for consolation. He knew he would not die until he had seen the Lord's messiah.

And so, every day, he obediently followed his religious routines, customary practices, those disciplines which he knew would bring new life. He went to the temple. He said his prayers. He observed people and prayed for them. Remember! Those are the disciplines, those are the practices, that cultivate new life!

And so, one day, almost suddenly, it happened. A young couple brought in their young child. That couple too, Joseph and Mary, were obediently following religious routines, customary practices, those disciplines, which would bring new life. Simeon knew that the young child was the one he had been waiting for his whole life, the one who would send him into the world in peace.

Simeon picked up Jesus in his arms and sang this song that has resounded through history:

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, \*  
according to thy word;  
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, \*  
which thou hast prepared before the face of all people,  
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, \*  
and to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

That was his Rite I, traditional, version. His contemporary version (Rite II in The Book of Common Prayer) talked about freedom:

*Lord, you now have set your servant free  
to go in peace as you have promised;  
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,*

*whom you have prepared for all the world to see:  
A Light to enlighten the nations,  
and the glory of your people Israel.*

He was free!

Today, February 2 in the Church, is the gridlocked intersection of all sorts of events. What is the feast we are observing today? It's not just a regular Sunday. Today is the Feast of the Presentation, when Jesus was presented, at forty days old, in the Temple. It's Candlemas in the Church, when we light candles to signify light in the midst of winter darkness.

But today is also Scout Sunday, when we honor the tradition of scouting in our church and in our country. Blessing to you, Scouts! For most of our country, today is also Super Bowl Sunday, surely the Great High Feast of our Football Culture""when even people who don't usually watch football are still drawn to watch the Super Bowl"" just like they don't usually go to church, but they will go on Christmas and Easter. (Same phenomenon!)

In our own church, our youth keep S-O-U-P-E-R Bowl Sunday, collecting canned soup and canned foods and boxed goods for food pantries and soup kitchens across our country. We unabashedly use the Super Bowl hype as a way to gather food for the poor. Blessings to you, too!

Many of us are rejoicing and thanking God for the ministry of the Cathedral Antiques Show. Blessings to you, and to your patience and flexibility this past week!

Let's see. What else is going on today? Why, it's Groundhog Day, of course. Those of us not interested in football have tuned in to learn whether our favorite groundhog will see his shadow today. Well, that's some sort of tradition. Will we have six weeks more of winter or not?

Wow, the themes for church this morning have all converged like an amazing traffic jam. Sunday morning today at the Cathedral has brought as many possible themes as there were cars on the road last Tuesday. Maybe the proper church observance for this morning is a gridlocked intersection.

Surely, however, the most acute personal experience we bring to this day, February 2, is our recovery from the astounding winter storm traffic gridlock of last Tuesday and Wednesday. Whether some groundhog saw his shadow today or not, we want winter to be over.

However, there is something far worse than winter, and even worse than traffic jams, that I want to be over. Like Simeon, I, too, am waiting for something. I, too, am waiting to be set free, released, from something.

But what I am waiting to finish is the blaming and the scapegoating. Last Wednesday, like many of you, I had the radio or television on, listening to the media analysts and accusers, and I finally got tired of it. I got tired of trying to find fault, trying to place blame, trying to find a scapegoat.

And, I got tired, once again, of people finding fault with the South. For so many people, the South seems to exist only as a convenient scapegoat for all that is wrong with the world. So what; that cannot be our way. It is the way of the world, not God, to place blame elsewhere. The way of the world is to scapegoat someone when something goes wrong. The way of the world is to think that if we can blame someone else, then we will feel a bit better.

I am reminded of the old saying by W.H. Auden about the weather:

*","weather  
Is what the nasty people are  
Nasty about, and the nice  
Show a common joy in observing."*

Why do we blame? Why does every problem, or every misfortune, have to involve blaming someone else? That blaming,

that scapegoating, is not a good way for any society to live, not a good model for any children among us. Think about today's gospel, saying in its last verse that "Jesus grew, and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon him" (Luke 2: 40). Jesus, as a child, learned from his community around him. Much of our culture this past week has been trying to blame or scapegoat someone else. In so doing, we have been teaching our children that when an ice storm occurs, when a misfortune occurs, we must blame someone!

Now, I know that our society needs accountability. *[But, even if we think of blaming as a form of legitimate accountability, then I believe there are always two better places to assign blame than to various individuals. The first place we ought to assign blame is to ourselves, as a community. Communities bear pain and blame better than individuals. Here in the greater Atlanta area, we can be legitimately blamed as a community who depends upon our cars, not public transportation. That is who we are. We enjoy living here, but excessive dependence upon the automobile is one of the prices of living here.*

*The other person we can blame is God. I know that sounds strange, and even sacrilegious. But God, too, bears blame pretty well, and God has endured complaining for generations! Read the Psalms and the Histories and the Prophets! One of the reasons God exists is so that we can have someone to blame!* [previous bracketed section was omitted at the Sunday morning delivery]

But, after this week, will we remember who we blamed? Or will we remember who we helped?

We know who the heroes were this week. The heroes were the people who were sent out "like Simeon" to do their ordinary and routine jobs, and they did them exceedingly well, diligently and faithfully and responsibly. But then, in the midst of being responsible, they were suddenly "like Simeon" in the midst of something extraordinary. They were bus drivers staying with their children, even overnight in schools. They were neighbors pushing and shoving cars. They were homeowners walking the street and inviting strangers to spend the night. They were Home Depot and Waffle House and CVS pharmacy workers, and countless others, keeping their doors open and giving shelter to the stranger in need.

Gridlock happens in this life. But when gridlock occurs, the only way out is to bless. When gridlock occurs in this life, we can choose to blame or to bless. Blame produces more gridlock. Blessing is the only way out.

The word, "blame" is actually a shortened form of the word, "blaspheme," to speak evil of something or someone.

Again, I know that our community needs accountability. We all need each other to be accountable. But blame and blasphemy are something else. Those words are related to the word, "accuse." This past week, I heard all sorts of accusing.

Did you know, in the Bible, that the word "Satan" actually means "accuse"? Satan is the great Accuser. But, if the word for accuse is basically the same word as Satan, then I believe that the word for "Bless" is the same word as God. We can blame, or we can bless.

Isn't it odd that the weather causes people to act like themselves, only more so. Or, as the old English ditty goes:

*Whether the weather be mild  
or whether the weather be not,  
Whether the weather be cold  
or whether the weather be hot,*

*We'll weather the weather  
whatever the weather,  
Whether we like it or not.*

I thought of another biblical character this past week, a rather unknown one, one who couldn't drive very well. But he was driving a donkey. In fact, his donkey, his transportation, kept sliding off the road and running into things. I am talking about the delightful character, Balaam, whose story is described in Numbers, chapter 22.

Balaam, a local prophet, had been sent out to do a job; he had been hired to curse the Israelites. And so he left on his

commute. But his donkey got stuck in a series of gridlocks. In the first accident, his donkey slid out off the road into a field. Balaam got the donkey going again, but then the donkey slammed into a rock restraining wall. Balaam got the donkey cranked up again and headed back into the road. But at the third time, the donkey just quit altogether and lay down under Balaam, like a car at a complete standstill on I-285.

What was wrong? What was wrong was that Balaam thought he had been sent out to curse. It turned out that Balaam had actually been sent out by God to bless! To bless Israel, rather than curse! It was an angel that was turning Balaam's job to blessing.

I think that was Simeon's call, too, on that Feast of the Presentation two thousand years ago. Simeon saw the child Jesus come in, and he picked up Jesus and blessed him. And Simeon said, "Lord you now have set your servant free! You are sending out your servant in peace! These eyes of mine have seen the Savior!"

Little did we know last Tuesday afternoon, whatever we were doing, we were not being sent out in our cars to curse or to find blame. At our places of work, we were not there simply to make a bigger profit and cut costs. We were not going home just to escape the tribulations of the world. We were not speaking just to make ourselves look good. No matter where we were last Tuesday and Wednesday, we were there to bless.

We Christians are sent out into the world, not to blame but to bless. We are sent out not to curse, but to save. The ultimate gridlock is go out into the world looking for someone to blame. The ultimate freedom, the ultimate release, is to bless. May our blessing be a light to the nations.

AMEN.

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