

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to morning prayers at the Memorial Church. I invite you please to rise for our responsorial psalm, which is number eight in your black psalter.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth. You who have covered the heavens with your splendor.

Congregation:

From the mouths of infants and sucklings you have founded strength on account of your foes, to put an end to enemy and avenger.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

When I behold your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place...

Congregation:

What is man that you have been mindful of him, mortal man that you have taken note of him...

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

That you have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty.

Congregation:

You have made him master over your handiwork, laying the world at his feet.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Sheep and oxen, all of them, the wild beasts, too...

Congregation:

The birds of the heavens, the fish of the sea, whatever travels the paths of the seas.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name throughout the earth!

Choir:

(singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the Gospel according to St. Luke, from the second chapter, beginning at the 34th verse. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Jesus' 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 Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of 84. She never left the temple, but worshiped there with fasting and praying night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Here ends the lesson. In addition to it being Ground Hog Day, today is also Candlemas, or the Feast of the Presentation, and that's the scene I just read. Jesus' presentation at the temple where he is met by these two figures, Simeon and Anna, about whom I will say more. It's called Candlemas because historically this was the day when you bless candles. These beeswax candles would be blessed today for use throughout the year. Epiphany is the season of light. Despite the circumstances outside, or maybe because of the circumstances outside, it's the season of light and these candles are blessed and Jesus is the light of the world and people would use these candle all day.

Most days when I visit you, we have what are called lesser feasts. I talk to you about saints and saints' lives. Today is a principle feast, or a great feast, and it commemorates not a saint, but an event in the life of Jesus, this presentation at the temple.

But I'm going to talk about some saints, specifically two saints who are in this story, Simeon and Anna. But more on them in a minute. What is this feast, the presentation, the Feast of the Presentation? Today is 40 days after Christmas. In Exodus 13, the people of Israel are instructed to, at 40 days after the birth of the first male child, to bring that child and offer a sacrifice to redeem the child. According to the law, the firstborn males of both beasts and humans belong to God and must either be sacrificed or redeemed. And so this is what this family was doing at the temple that day.

In the book of Leviticus, it was also said that the mother of this child would come and offer rites of purification for herself. So, this is what this family is doing and why this feast is known as the Presentation of Jesus at the temple or the purification of the virgin. In the Eastern church, the name of the feast is also known as the Meeting of the Lord.

So, who does this 40-year-old baby meet at the temple? First is Simeon. There's a famous song, which I will say in a moment as I dismiss you, it's the conclusion to the compline service, if you come to that service. Lord, you now have set your servant free, Simeon's famous song.

We read that Simeon was righteous and devout, but I think maybe what's important about Simeon and his appearance in this story is not who he was, but who he was not. He was not a priest. He was not a scribe. He was not one of the temple elders or a political leader of the people. He was just a guy who was worried about the way things were and had been waiting for the consolation of Israel and came to the temple that morning.

And Anna, the other person Jesus meets. A widow, we're told. If we pay attention to the details, the spare details given here, we can discern that she has had a hard life. It says that she married her husband and then lived with him for seven years before she became a widow. She's now 84. Given marriage customs at that time, we can reasonably conclude that Anna has lived as a widow, an incredibly vulnerable state at this time, for 60 or so years. She lives at the temple day and night, were told. She's basically homeless. She lives there asking for mercy, praying for mercy.

These, in the gospel of Luke, are the first two people who recognize Jesus. The shepherds see Jesus, but angels tell the shepherds to go there. Everybody else who declares Jesus Lord has advanced warning from some supernatural person. Simeon and Anna, these two are the first two who see with their own eyes. Think about that. This is who the gospel of Luke calls as his first witnesses to the divinity of Jesus. This is who God calls as his first witnesses to the divinity of Jesus, a guy who is hoping for some consolation and a homeless woman begging for mercy.

Epiphany is the season of light. This feast is the day when traditionally we have blessed candles to light us throughout the year because Jesus is the light of the world. And I'm reminded of a famous line of C. S. Lewis's from the book *The Weight of Glory*, in which he says, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen." And this is sun, S-U-N, like the star around which we resolve. "As I believe the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else. I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it, I see everything else."

And actually, that's not true. It's a nice line, but it's false. Who can see the sun? Even if you could tolerate the pain of staring at the sun, it would be too bright. All we ever see are what illuminates. We see it through everything else. And it is so telling on this day that we are invited to see God through Simeon, elderly and uncomfortable. And Anna, vulnerable and unhoused. We see God through them, and through them, we learn the sort of God that we have and who he has come to save.

Let us pray. Almighty and ever-living 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 forever. Amen.

And now we pray the words Jesus taught us, saying, our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please join in singing our concluding hymn, number 50.

Congregation:

(Singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

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. Glory to the father and to the son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning is now and will be forever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.