

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

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Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. Please rise, as you're able, and join me in our responsive Psalm, number 10, in your black psalter.

Why do you stand so far off, O God, and hide yourself in time of trouble?

Congregation:

The wicked arrogantly persecute the poor, but they are trapped in the schemes they have devised.

Elizabeth Propst:

The wicked boast of their heart's desire, the covetous curse and revile God.

Congregation:

The wicked are so proud that they care not for God. Their only thought is, "God does not matter."

Elizabeth Propst:

Their ways are devious at all times. Your judgements are far above out of their sight. They defy all their enemies.

Congregation:

They say in their heart, "I shall not be shaken. No harm shall happen to me ever."

Elizabeth Propst:

Arise, O Lord! Punish the wicked, O God. Do not ignore the helpless.

Congregation:

Rise up, O Holy One. Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the afflicted.

Elizabeth Propst:

Why should the wicked revile God? Why should they say in their heart, "You do not care"?

Congregation:

Surely, you behold trouble and misery. You see it and take it into your own hand.

Choir:

(Singing).

Elizabeth Propst:

This morning's reading is from the second chapter of Luke, beginning at the 25th verse.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him into his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations; a light for the revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people in Israel."

The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts 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 very old, she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was 84. She never left the temple but worshiped day and night, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. Here ends the lesson.

So this is the reading from today's lectionary, our church calendar of scripture readings. It tells the story of the presentation of Jesus at the temple, which is one of the 12 great feast days in the Catholic Church. It's also called Candlemas, because it's the day traditionally when all the candles in the church for the next year are brought to the priest and blessed. And in the story, Mary and Joseph have gone to the temple to perform a traditional rite of purification that a woman would perform 40 days after giving birth, so that she could enter the temple again, which is why we read this story 40 days every year after Christmas. It's also the day, traditionally, that we are no longer allowed to have Christmas decorations up in our homes, so if anybody needs to run home after this...

And so they go to the temple to perform this rite. And this man named Simeon, who we are told has been told by the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he sees the Messiah, he comes up to them, he delivers this prophecy, and then he turns to Mary and delivers the second part of the prophecy to her. In some traditions, Simeon's title is Righteous Simeon the God-Receiver, and in other traditions he's just called Simeon the old man, which feels like a noticeable difference. And especially in the Protestant tradition, I think we read this story as a story of God's promise fulfilled, as a story of the recognition of the Messiah. "I've seen God finally at work in the world after centuries of silence." But other traditions, the Catholic tradition in particular, and I, this morning, read this story and think about Mary.

Simeon says to her, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel," and indeed, "a sword will pierce your own soul." I think we have this image of Mary in our popular and our spiritual imagination as this calm, quiet figure who trusts in God above all else. She is serene, even in the midst of the greatest grief. She cries a single, perfect tear. But I think that if we actually think about what Mary's life was like, this is an unfair state of existence to impose on her. We don't know how old Mary was, but it's highly unlikely she was any older than 18 when she gave birth. She was probably somewhere between 13 and 16. And in this story, she's just had her first child six weeks ago.

The story also tells us that her small family doesn't have many resources. Wealthy families would sacrifice a lamb and a dove for this ritual. But Luke takes care to tell us that Joseph and Mary are making the ritual sacrifice that would've been chosen by the poor, which is just two doves. And so I imagine this teenage mother, still recovering from pregnancy and childbirth, spending what little money she has to

complete the ritual that will allow her back into the temple. And then here comes Simeon, who announces to her, "Good news! You're going to lose this child one day, and it will be as if a sword had pierced your own soul." And I find it hard to imagine meeting that news with anything like serenity or trust in God's plan.

And Mary had profound faith, we know that. We read the Magnificat, the hymn, that she lifts up to God the learning of her pregnancy, and we see faith there. But profound faith is not incompatible with fear, with doubt, with rage, with frustration. And yet we impose on her this image of serene and uncomplaining acceptance of unimaginable loss, which I think is unfair to her and unfair to us.

As many of you may have, yesterday I was watching the funeral service for Tyre Nichols. And as maybe is the case for many of you as well, the living voice and face for me as this story has unfolded has been that of Tyre's mother, RowVaughn Wells. And I've seen news articles praising RowVaughn's grace, her forgiveness of the men who murdered her son, lifting her up as a symbol of what peaceful resistance can and ought to look like.

And she is just the most recent in a long line of mothers, from the mother of Emmett Till, the mothers of Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin, Philando Castile, who are held to these exacting expectations for what their pain must look like in the public sphere if they want justice for their child. Samaria Rice, Tamir Rice's mother, said in an interview about a year after her son died, "There's a certain way you have to go in front of the media to let them know that you want justice for your baby." Lesley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother, wrote in her book about her experience and her son's life, "Every time I leave the house, I try to look presentable, because I don't know who might be watching me."

And so we hold these women, Black women, to the image of the Marian ideal of what a mother's perfect grief has to look like. They have to be coiffed, they have to be composed, they have to be enduring, long-suffering. They can be righteous, but must be controlled. They can be outraged, they cannot be bitter. They must always be hopeful, and their grief is scrutinized and idealized and universalized, and they must be perfect mourners and perfect mothers. They must be more than superhuman if they want their child's basic humanity to be recognized. And if they succeed at this, in turn what they get is we make them into symbols, and lift them up as perfect examples of what grief ought to look like in the face of injustice, when I imagine what they want least of all is to be made into symbols. And what they might want more than anything is moment of silence and space for the grief to be nobody's but their own.

And so these are the impossible things that this country demands of women, and of Black and of brown women in particular, to react to devastating, incomprehensible injustice in the way that we imagine Mary might have, in the way that our pictures and our stories of Mary tell us we ought to grieve. But I think the more human approach, and maybe the more Christlike approach, would be to give Mary the right to have grieved in the same way that we do.

Luke's account in his gospel doesn't record Mary's response to these events at the temple. But for this morning, I am choosing to imagine that Mary told Righteous Simeon the God-Receiver exactly where he could stick his prophecy, and called it a day. Will you join me in a moment of silent prayer?

And now praying the words that Christ gave to us, 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.

Congregation:

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.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise and join in our closing hymn, O Gladsome Light, O Grace, number 50 in your crimson hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(Singing).

Elizabeth Propst:

Christ has no hands in this world but your hands, and no voice in this world but your voice. And so let our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love, on this day and on all days. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.