

2025 Presentation

A young woman and her husband bring their firstborn son to Jerusalem, to be presented to God as required by the law. It must have occurred often, a young family entering the Temple with a couple of frightened birds in a basket or cage. The birds are a sacrifice, demanded by the Law of Moses. Two small birds are offered to God, and the people see it as a mercy, because the two small birds are offered in place of the boy. The birds will die so that the boy doesn't have to.

In a time that was ancient even for this young family, people sacrificed their children to the gods, to the fires of Molech in the land of Canaan.

In a time that was more legend than history, a man took his son to a mountain, bound him and placed him on an altar, raised the knife to slay him, a sacrifice to the Living God—

But God stopped him, God told him that God did not need or desire the blood of children, that the God of Abraham was not that kind of a God. And God provided a ram in place of the boy. God provided a way out.

Ever since, the God of Israel, the Living God has been a different kind of God, one who does not demand the sacrifice of children. But despite the many times the prophets declare that God does not desire sacrifice, blood offerings or burnt offerings, the people of God can't quite believe it. They—we—are convinced that without it, our worship isn't enough. We convince

ourselves that we aren't enough. We tell ourselves the birds are a mercy, a small violence to prevent a larger one.

But back to our story.

An old man enters the Temple, following the lead of the Holy Spirit. The old man has spent many years waiting for the fulfillment of a promise made to him. The promise that he will not die until he has seen 'the consolation of Israel.' He will not die until he has seen Israel's salvation—and not just Israel, he will see the salvation of the whole world. There has to be a lot of faith in that man, to believe that he will see the salvation of *this* world, the world he lives in, the world of violence and hatred and anger. Every day he looks out and sees more unrest, every day he grows older and weaker and more tired, and still no sign of this hope.

What is he watching for? Is he, like the crowds, watching for a military Messiah, one who will lead them to freedom from Rome and domination of the world? Somehow, I can't believe that. He was guided by the Holy Spirit, he knows that the salvation of Israel will come in a different form. Salvation will not come through people fighting and killing one another; salvation will come through a man of peace.

But however salvation will come, it's a long time coming. I imagine this old, old man slowly making his way up the steps of the Temple, hardly daring to hope that *this* time he would not be disappointed. This time the promise will

be fulfilled and he can finally, *finally* rest, he can *finally* enter into the perfect rest promised the faithful, he can die in the knowledge that all *will* be well. Salvation has come to Israel, and through Israel to the world.

He enters the Temple and looks around. He sees behind him a young woman clutching her baby to her as her husband holds the birds for the sacrifice. He sees priests and servants of the Temple. An old woman is coming up the stairs. He sees no man of peace, no man who stands tall and grace-filled, no man of salvation. He starts back to the door, but the young family comes up to him. The husband holds out the birds and asks for help, explains they have brought their boy for the purification according to the Law of Moses. And the boy's name is Jesus.

Jesus. Yeshua. Hebrew for *Salvation*. The boy's name is SALVATION. And now the old man knows, *here* is the fulfillment of the promise. *Here* is the salvation for which he has been waiting. They offer him the birds but he takes the boy. Perhaps the mother gasps, in fear that time has wound backward and the boy will be sacrificed in place of the birds. But time has not wound backward. Or forward, for that matter. He will eventually die in place of the birds. He will eventually die so that the truth can be revealed, God wants *no more* death on God's account. No more sacrifices, not even of the smallest, most insignificant animal. No more violence in the name of God. Our God is not one of the gods of Canaan, who demand blood to be appeased. Our God is the God of Salvation, the God of peace. The God of Life.

When I was a child, we would sing the “Song of Simeon” in church on the days when we had Morning Prayer. Those were the days of Prayer Book revision (some of you long-time Episcopalians may remember the “Zebra Book”), but I learned this first in the 1928 version. “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word...”

It always made me cry, but I didn’t know why. My child’s brain couldn’t figure out what my child’s heart knew. We hear “Lord you now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word,” but this is not simply going out of the Temple and back to his home. Simeon is now free to depart from this life. This is a song about Simeon’s death, but it is a song of deep joy. What a blessing, if we were to experience death as a promise, a gift at the end of a long and faithful life. Simeon understood that the hope of this child is the hope of a world where people die peacefully of old age. In Simeon’s song is the ongoing hope that our eyes have seen God’s salvation, which God has prepared for all the world to see.

I still cry, because I realize we haven’t heard it yet, we haven’t heard the depth of that song of Simeon. We are still fighting, we are not departing in peace according to God’s word, We are still piercing the heart of the one who loves us because we haven’t been able to hear the hope in the promise that God has prepared a salvation for all of us, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to the people of God. We still think a small act of violence is an acceptable replacement for a larger one.

But we must not fool ourselves into believing that God ever prefers violence over peace.

In our psalm for today we read “The sparrow has found her a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young: by the side of your altar, O LORD of hosts, my king and my God.” God does not desire the death of even the smallest of birds, and would prefer that they find a home beside the altar of God, safe and protected, away from danger. When Jesus was an adult he teaches, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight. But even the hairs of your head are all counted...you are of more value than many sparrows.”

So we are blessed to have one more character appear in this Gospel story today.

Anna. The prophet. The woman whose life could not have been easy—widowed at a young age. At the age of 84, still identified as daughter-of instead of wife-of or mother-of. She, too, waited and watched. Fasted and prayed, night and day. It says she never left the Temple, so she saw countless animals brought in, slaughtered and offered up as sacrifice. She saw plenty of young families, baby boys in their arms, carrying a birdcage or pulling a lamb along behind them. Saw countless small sacrifices made in the place of the larger one. Heard the frightened screech or bleat or moan of an animal about to be offered up by humans who thought *that* was what God wanted.

And then comes the day when she witnesses something new, an epiphany, a manifestation of God's own light, bundled in his mother's arms. And what does she do?

After all those years, what does she do, that little sparrow that had found a place by the side of God's altar?

She goes *out*. Out! Out into Jerusalem! She leaves her safe little widow's nest and ventures out into a city she hasn't seen for who-knows-how-long. She goes out to praise God, and to declare the goodness of God to "all who were looking for...redemption."

God had once again provided a way out. *We* are enough.

There is room for you with the sparrows, beside the altar of God. There is room for you in the Temple, raising your hands in glory to God for all God's marvelous works. There is room for you in the world, declaring a salvation that is unlike the one the world offers. There is room for you in the heart of God, as long as you are willing to share that space with the sparrows and the Gentiles and all those who have discovered that the way out of the violence is the way into the peace of God, which passes all understanding.

I pray that we never stop watching, with Simeon, for the better way out, the way of salvation and peace. I also pray that when, with Anna, we are blessed enough to witness that moment of God creating a way where there was no way, we have the courage to step out of our places of comfort and safety and go out into the world

declaring the Good News of God in Jesus Christ to the people who most need to hear it. That is sacrifice enough. No violence required.

Amen.

Blessing of candles

There is an old tradition of blessing the candles on this day, which led to it being called Candlemas. As a way to remind us to be people who proclaim the Good News, I am going to bless these candles which have laid unused in a drawer in the Guild Room for at least as long as I have been around (almost 11 years). I will bless them, and I invite you to pick one up as you go back from communion. At the end of the service, after Annual Meeting, we will light them and carry them out into the world.

Light and peace, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Dear people of God, forty days ago we celebrated the joyful feast of the incarnation of Jesus. Today we recall the day on which he was presented in the temple, fulfilling the law of Moses. Led by the Spirit, Simeon and Anna came to the temple, recognized the child as the Christ, and proclaimed him with joy. United by the same

Spirit, we now enter the house of God, where we shall recognize Christ in the breaking of bread.

Let us pray.

O eternal God, who have created all things; on this day you fulfilled the petitions of the just Simeon: we humbly ask you to bless and sanctify these candles for our use. Graciously hear our prayers and be merciful to us, whom you have redeemed by your Son, who is the light of the world, and who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever. Amen.