

The Temple and the Messiah

Fr. Thomas Ryden

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Scriptures: Malachi 3:1-4. Psalm 84, Luke 2:22-40

One of the gifts of preaching through the liturgical year is that you get to revisit the same passage more than once. In these cases, there is a lot of richness in going slowly through a passage in sermon preparation another time, seeing new things, like hearing a new part in a song you know well. With preaching not being a weekly part of my ministry and our Sunday lectionary repeating itself every three years, this doesn't happen extremely often. But when we come to some of the feast days that is not the case; the same passages are used every year. Such is the case with Candlemas. When I have had the privilege to preach on these texts in the past, I have focused on the characters of Simeon and Anna, and rightly so, but this year as we revisit the text once again, I want to focus on the Temple, more specifically, Jesus entering the Temple.

And I don't know if you caught it, but we actually heard about this moment twice in our readings for today, in the Gospel reading of course, as the Holy Family comes to Jerusalem to observe the Law concerning the firstborn. But this event is also a fulfillment of what we heard from the prophet Malachi:

"And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of

silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.”

Now, it may be a little hard for you to imagine a baby as a refiner’s fire or an infant purifying the sons of Levi as one would purify gold or silver. And indeed the image that conjures up some interesting images when combined with the 40-day-old Jesus being carried into the Temple. But indeed, as Jesus would show in his teaching, it is those things considered least by the world that the work of God and the Kingdom of God also comes.

But also, as we think about Jesus and the Temple on this day that we remember their first pairing, I want us to remember that this is not the only time that the Lord enters his Temple in the Gospel story. In fact, Luke writes of three comings of Jesus into the Temple in his gospel, here as a baby in Luke 2, when he is listening and answering in the Temple as a 12-year-old at the end of this same chapter, and then in the final days before his crucifixion where he enters the Temple to cleanse it and then follows that by teaching there, and offering a word of judgment (this begins at the end of Luke 19). I think if we take these three comings of Jesus together, they show us how he truly is the fulfillment of this prophecy from Malachi, not only of the Temple in Jerusalem, but the Temple of our hearts.

Each of these comings of Jesus gives a word of judgment and correction to the way things are, in the Temple of course, but also in our lives, if we are able to listen. First, let’s ponder the humility of the Incarnation, so obviously on display as the second person of the Trinity, God himself, is carried into the Temple by his mother. This was

the rebuilt building that Solomon had constructed for Yahweh centuries ago. And here he enters it, vulnerable, weak, needy. Any parent who may feel embarrassment when their child makes noise in Church ought to be comforted that a 40-day-old Jesus, I would bet, made plenty of baby noises in the Temple. Anyone making up the story would have done things differently, there would be lightning and thunder involved. But our God is the God who put on flesh and made his dwelling among us, entering the world with the same weakness and dependence we all begin life with. This contrasts with the pomp and splendor of the Temple, which had been offerings of worship and beauty to God, but can become, like our own acts of righteousness and worship, means to be proud of ourselves, reasons to pat ourselves on the back. That God comes as a baby shows us just to what extent the best of our efforts fall short of the glory, the splendor, and the deep, deep love that God has for us. The baby serves as judgment, not only for a beautiful Temple that had been corrupted, but also for the self-righteousness we construct around ourselves as a means of earning God's favor.

In Luke's telling, Jesus next comes into the Temple when his parents bring him to the Feast of the Passover. You remember the story: Jesus is left behind in the Temple, worrying his parents and extending their trip by quite a bit. But he is found, safe and sound, in the Temple, asking questions and giving answers, amazing the most educated people in all of Israel. This pattern would of course continue in Jesus' life. Remember that refrain from the gospels, about Jesus' teaching, how people would marvel that he taught with authority, not like that of the scribes and Pharisees. This is the second judgment Jesus offers to the Temple of our hearts. What some would make complicated, following in the way God wants to go, Jesus makes it, not easy, but simple. Remember the simple clarity of the Great Commandment

and the Sermon on the Mount. The clear and consistent words of Jesus, who is himself the Word of God, stand in judgment over those times we try to obfuscate the truth, talk our way out of a hard teaching, or act like you need a Master's degree to really "get" the way of the Kingdom.

The last time Jesus comes into the Temple, he comes to clear it out of those who use it for wicked ends. Jesus clearing the Temple of the money changers in Luke 19 is followed by his confrontation with the Temple authorities, culminating in his foretelling of the destruction of the Temple in Luke 21. The implicit judgment of Jesus' life and teaching had become explicit and direct, which will ultimately lead to his death. Jesus comes in judgment of the sin that is in our world and in our lives. Unrighteousness cannot stand before him and while he is our gentle and lowly Good Shepherd, ways that are not of him lead to death and destruction. You will often see the use of Jesus clearing the Temple of the money changers as justification for Christians who treat others poorly. But instead of reading this story primarily as a guide for us in casting judgment, I think we are better served picturing ourselves as the Temple Jesus has come to cleanse and his perfect righteousness as the standard by which we are to be judged.

Taken together, these three entrances of Jesus, beginning with his entrance into the Temple as a baby, bring greater clarity to his fulfillment of the prophetic words of Malachi. Through his very incarnation and being, through his words, and through his actions, Jesus purifies and tests the Temple in Jerusalem and the temple of our hearts.

So what do we do with such a message, here in the midst of things. We are in the midst of waiting on the third coming of Jesus, not into his Temple but returning to come and usher us into the fulfillment of his Kingdom at his return. We are waiting for this full judgment Malachi speaks of, not only of the world, but of ourselves! The judgment and testing of God brings healing, and the leaving behind of those things that hinder our connection to him. Judgment is good news. If our hearts are the Temple, they need Jesus' cleansing presence, from the baby all the way to the Messiah with the whip of cords.

So we wait for him. And this is where we get back to Simeon and Anna. What wonderful models of faithful waiting they are to us, holding on to the promises of God despite their circumstances. Simeon had heard a word from the Lord, from the Holy Spirit, Luke says, that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. He held onto that promise and recognized the real thing when he saw it. He was so tuned to the true nature of God that when nearly all others were expecting a warrior Messiah entering the Temple on a horse, he saw the baby with his parents and knew it was him. Anna knew, too, that the redemption of Jerusalem had come, because her response to being widowed early in life was to pray and fast every day, living in the House of God. That devotion meant that when she saw Jesus, she knew.

Simeon and Anna are our exemplars of waiting for the "not yet" while we celebrate the "already." Their faithful listening, hope, and presence guide us as we await our coming King.

What are you waiting for today? Maybe it is that opportunity at work. Maybe it is that relationship you want to be reconciled. Maybe it is that work of healing that you have

been praying for. Whatever it is, and it is good to wait and ask for those things, may it never eclipse your desire to see the King come in and cleanse his Temple.

And while we wait, let us be encouraged by the words of the Psalmist, that there is no better place to wait than the house of the Lord:

How lovely is your dwelling place,

O LORD of hosts!

My soul longs, yes, faints

for the courts of the LORD;

my heart and flesh sing for joy

to the living God.

For a day in your courts is better

than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God

than dwell in the tents of wickedness.

For the LORD God is a sun and shield;

the LORD bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does he withhold

from those who walk uprightly.

O LORD of hosts,

blessed is the one who trusts in you!

The coming of Jesus means a lot of things, including the judgment of all that is wrong - in the world and in ourselves, but the promise of Candlemas is that his coming is always good news. Let us wait in hope and stay in the presence of God, in faithful prayer like Anna and Simeon, awaiting that final coming of the Lord.