

Feast of the Presentation, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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The stones
were cold under her feet that morning,
as cold as the pit of her stomach
as she held her tiny baby close,
only six weeks in this world,
held him close
as they threaded through the crowds,
held him close, as around her people argued
and laughed
and prayed.

It was busy that day
in the temple;
perhaps it was always that way,
daily prayers,
sacrifices,
people just wanting to be close
to where they said
God was.

She remembered the psalm,
“How dear to me is your dwelling, O LORD of hosts!
Happy are they who dwell in your house!
they will always be praising you.”

But she didn't feel
like praising God.
She was afraid.

The cold inside her - surely the baby could feel it?
But no,
he slept peacefully on,
and just ahead of her, her husband
strode purposefully on,
the pigeons required by law
fluttering,

feet caught firm in his hand.

Would it be today, that God would call in his favor?
Would the coins, hastily scraped together
be enough to buy back her son?

That was what the law said,
“every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”,
but could be bought back for the sum of a few coins
and live a normal life.

There was nothing unusual about this day -
every firstborn son
was brought to the temple.
She could see them around her,
other women
with their babies held close,
proudly smiling.
It was a day of celebration,

Except for her.
Because her child was far from normal.
Her child was announced by an angel, her child’s birth
was attended
by shepherds and kings,
and though he cried and fed and burped
just like the other babies
she never knew
just when that angel might re-appear, just when
God might reclaim
his Son.

Pushed to the back of her mind,
fighting the tiredness of late night feeds,
the intensity of Jerusalem,
and the newness of it all,
she followed her husband into the temple.

And so when the old man
reached out his arms
to her child,
it was as if
the time she had always feared, always known

would come
had arrived,
and all too soon.

Six precious weeks,
and nine long months before that,
and was he to be taken from her?

Simeon cradled the child in his arms,
marveling at the wonder of it all,
callused finger
stroking downy cheeks,
eyelids fluttering
as the baby stirred in his sleep.
“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”
And looking up
he saw the parents
their faces filled with pride and bewilderment and fear.
He placed the precious child
gently in his mothers arms,
and blessed them.
“Go in peace.”

But it was a mixed blessing.
For mixed with the words of blessing
were the words Mary feared to hear.
“This child is destined for the falling
and the rising of many in Israel,
and to be a sign to be opposed,
so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed –
and sword will pierce your own soul, too.”
Words which sounded to Mary
like
“Go in peace, I will not take your child from you.
But as you go, remember that this child is not only yours, but God’s,
and Israel’s too. And the time will come when all you fear,
will come true”.

They were words of promise,
but also
words of pain.

At Christmas
it sometimes seems
that the story of Jesus
is like a fairy tale.
An appealing scene,
bathed in the soft glow of candle light,
and everyone lives happily ever after.

But we know it's not true.
Everyone doesn't live happily ever after. Not in our lives,
not in Jesus' life,
not even in fairytales.

Before the happy ending
there has to be a wicked witch
or a big bad wolf
or a lost glass slipper;
you have to eat your vegetables before you get ice-cream,
and hardship builds character.
The cliches are our way
of making sense of life
in all its pain and sorrow and unpredictability.

We are just at the beginning of the story,
and the worst, and the best,
is yet to come.

We sit in a strange time. This feast of Candlemas,
the Presentation of Christ in the temple,
marks the end of the celebrations
of the new born Christ-child.
It will not be so long
before Ash Wednesday
and Lent will be upon us,
later this year,
but still sooner
than we expect it,
the time when we prepare
to remember

this very same Christ-child's death.

Birth and death embrace this child, even today
as we celebrate his Presentation.

Simeon

seeing the new born child,
prepares to die,
knowing that it is time
and he can rest in God,
knowing that death
is not something
to be feared

He sees

in this tiny baby
the fullness of God's promises,
the the writer to the Hebrews would later describe in this way:
"Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood,
Jesus himself likewise shared the same things,
so that through death
 he might destroy
the one who has the power of death."

Hebrews continues,

"Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested. "

What does that mean? A sacrifice for our sins?

Sometimes I'm not sure. Not sure, because Hebrews uses the language of sacrifice, the language of a system of priesthood which is so far from our experience.

How it is

that Jesus' death achieves anything
is a mystery. A mystery,
not so much because its deliberately hidden,
but because it's so far outside our own experience
so far outside the way we do things
that it's difficult for us to comprehend.
Because every time we try to pin down
just exactly how it is that the life and death of Jesus works

we end up by pinning God down, and making God into a mere reflection of ourselves.

But we do know that, to use the language of our prayer book, we know that there are things we have done, which would better have been left undone, and things that we should have done, which we haven't. We know, that just this last week we opened my mouths, and said things that wounded people, just this last week, we failed to listen to someone, and rode rough shod over them, just this last week. We know that we could drown in regrets for what we have done. We know that life is a mixture of pain and promise. And we know, that even in the best of times, a shadow may be waiting around the next corner.

But we also know that someone thought it so important that generations of people should hear the story of Simeon and his meeting with Jesus, that they told it, and wrote it down, and kept writing it down, until now, so that we might know too about a God who kept a promises, and let an old man die in peace, about a God who honored the obedience of a young woman and her husband, and gave them the joy of seeing their child grow in strength and wisdom, about a God who did not pull back from the pain of the world but entered it freely and shared it with us, who promises forgiveness, and promises to be with us,

in all the pain, and in all the promise.

This baby,
who we remember today in the arms of Simeon,
whose birth we celebrate each Christmas,
this baby
who became the man whose death we remember each Good Friday,
this baby,
who defeated the powers of evil and death once and for all
that first Easter morning,
comes to bring forgiveness,
comes to bring peace.
Peace with God.
Peace with each other,
And perhaps hardest,
peace with ourselves.
For as we look into the eyes of that baby,
we look into the eyes of God,
who loves us
more
than we can ever imagine.

And perhaps it's important that we hear this story today, at our annual meeting,
as we look back at the things we have done this past year as a church,
and yes, also look back at the things we have not done,
to be reminded
of the incredible risk that Mary and Joseph took
in taking their baby to the temple,
in obedience to God,
and the incredible blessings
that came their way.

Thanks be to God.