

February 2, 2020  
Feast of the Presentation  
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Malachi 3:1-4  
Psalm 84  
Hebrews 2:14-18  
Luke 2:22-40

This is one of those lectionary-leap Sundays. We've been hearing about the adult Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew; today, here we are back with the baby Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. The reason is that today, February 2, is the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple.

As a catechetical exercise, please find a red Book of Common Prayer. Turn to page 15. That's the first page of the section titled "The Calendar of the Church Year." You'll see that the Principal Feasts observed in the Episcopal Church are Easter Day, Ascension Day, The Day of Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, All Saints' Day, Christmas Day, and The Epiphany. Some are assigned a fixed day, and some are pegged to Easter, which of course shifts with the full moon. Turn the page, and you'll see it noted that *every* Sunday is a feast day. But are also three additional fixed-date feast days that take precedence over Sunday when their date falls on a Sunday. They are The Holy Name, The Presentation, and The Transfiguration.<sup>1</sup> In a nutshell, on those days we do the readings and prayers for the feast rather than for the Sunday; hence, our readings today. You can put your *Prayer Books* aside for a few minutes.

The Presentation is one of those feast days that Roman Catholics observe but our more fully reformed Protestant siblings ignore. One good reason to observe it is that the Revised Common Lectionary, the ecumenical lectionary that we usually follow, never assigns today's reading from Luke. That's too bad, really, because it has a lot to offer. This is one of those readings for which I was tempted to simply stand here and read commentaries explaining the details. I won't do that, but I will point out that Luke here continues his careful crafting of Jesus' birth story. By going to the temple, Mary and Joseph are doing their duty as faithful Jews. Simeon and Anna echo Luke's earlier portrayal of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Both couples echo the Hebrew Scripture story of Elkanah and Hannah, elderly parents of the prophet Samuel. Luke again positions Jesus not simply as prophet but rather as messiah, the fulfillment of God's promise of salvation. This promise is being fulfilled in an unexpected way: with salvation not only for Israel, but for the whole world.

I want to hone in on the middle part of this passage. Standing alone, it's the known as "The Song of Simeon" or the *Nunc dimittis*. The words *Nunc dimittis* are the Latin for its first words, which translate as "now you dismiss." It shows up in *The Book of Common Prayer* as part of the Daily Office, prayers intended for use throughout the day. "The Song of Simeon: is an optional canticle for evening prayer and the specified closing of compline, or night prayers. It may be said or sung; our introit today was a choral setting.

Take up your *Prayer Books* again, and turn to page 134. For compline, "The Song of Simeon" includes an antiphon. With the antiphon, it becomes one of the loveliest passages in the *Prayer Book*. As part of compline, it's meant to be repeated every night to mark the end of another day. Here's how it goes:

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake  
we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.

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.

Guide us waking, O Lord, and guard us sleeping; that awake  
we may watch with Christ, and asleep we may rest in peace.<sup>2</sup>

In the very first *Book of Common Prayer*, the one from the year 1549, Thomas Cranmer included forms for the Daily Office.<sup>3</sup> This was something he borrowed and adapted it from the Roman Catholic monastic tradition, where it is also known as the Liturgy of the Hours. In doing so, he condensed the nine Benedictine hours into two Anglican ones: matins or morning prayer; and evensong or evening prayer. Our current *Prayer Book* retains those two and adds short forms for noonday and night prayer. Remember, Cranmer's work was radical: in this and with the entire *Book of Common Prayer*, he took what had been claimed by priests and monks and put it in the hands and on the lips of the people.

We Episcopalians are people of the Book, *The Book of Common Prayer*. If we're longtime Episcopalians, it's quite possible that we're not very comfortable with extemporaneous prayer. But we do get something in exchange. We get beautiful words meant to be repeated, words that work even when we don't know what to pray. Time and experience tells us that the repetition itself is transformative.

Today also happens to be Groundhog Day. I remembered that and started thinking about the film "Groundhog Day." It features Bill Murray as a jerk of a television weather forecaster appropriately named Phil, and Andie MacDowell as his producer and eventual romantic interest. On Groundhog Day, Phil-the-human is sent to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to cover Phil-the-groundhog. Even if you haven't seen the film, you probably know its premise, which has entered our cultural lexicon. To say that a situation is "like 'Groundhog Day'" is to complain that it is on endless repeat.

As film critic Roger Ebert describes it, "The movie, as everyone knows, is about a man who finds himself living the same day over and over and over again. He is the only person in his world who knows this is happening, and after going through periods of dismay and bitterness, revolt and despair, suicidal self-destruction and cynical recklessness, he begins to do something that is alien to his nature. He begins to learn."<sup>4</sup> About that last part, rather than saying that he begins to *learn*, I would say that he begins to *change*. A former total narcissist, he begins to find true meaning and deep joy. He becomes a genuinely good person.

Appropriately, film critic Roger Ebert offered only lukewarm appreciation of the film when it was first released, but he later changed his mind, adding it to his list of 300 “great movies.” Apparently, like Phil, apparently he needed some repetition. The film has also been praised as spiritually instructive by various faith traditions. Buddhists use it to teach reincarnation; Roman Catholics talk about purgatory.<sup>5</sup> Here’s my take on the film, at least as of Fridays re-viewing: I don’t see it as being about conscious self-improvement. Instead, I think it’s about what can happen when a person keeps showing up, showing up over and over and over again, showing up until the daily exchanges of individually insignificant nothings begin to add up to something important and profound.

We are approaching Lent, the season of repentance. That’s not what I’m talking about here. I don’t mean to dismiss it; there are times when we ought to own up and shape up. But I also think that our relationship with God is usually much less volatile and more subtle than that. I think God routinely shows up for us, and we should probably routinely show up for God.

To help us keep showing up for God, the Church orders our prayer life through the liturgical year and with the daily office. It also orders the prayer life for a lifetime, with baptism and marriage and burial. I should mention that the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple recounted by Luke reflects Hebrew Scripture requirement for “purification” of a woman after the birth of her first son. In his 1549 *Prayer Book*, Cranmer included a rite for the purification of women after childbirth. Now stripped of any idea of “purification,” a similar rite is included in our current Prayer Book, as “Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption for a Child.”<sup>6</sup> Then and now, the rite includes a prayer of thanks for the safety of mother and child. We might take that as a reminder that, despite our medical advancements, childbirth remains risky, especially for women of color.

The church’s ordering—by day, by year, by lifetime—is not opposed to our human existence; it is rather a profound response to our human existence. I think that we as humans are created for connection to both the solid earth upon which we stand and the divine ultimate toward which we reach. The church must always occupy the space in between, to facilitate both the standing and the reaching.

At the end of the day, Simeon says all that needs to be said. On our worst days, those words are his. On our best days, those words are ours. Worst or best or in between, it helps to keep saying them. We are reminded that salvation is here, now, whether or not we have seen it; we are reminded that we do what we can, and God will take care of the rest.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-5.

<sup>3</sup> The 1549 Book of Common Prayer is available online at [http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/BCP\\_1549.htm](http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/BCP_1549.htm) (accessed February 2, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-groundhog-day-1993> (accessed February 2, 2020).

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<sup>5</sup> Find reference....

<sup>6</sup> BCP, 439.