

Sermon by Lex Breckinridge – 2/2/2020

Epiphany 4 – Feast of the Presentation

Luke 2:22-40

There's an elephant in the room here at St. Thomas. One that we are all aware of, one that's simmering just below the surface, if you'll permit me to mix metaphors here. The name of that elephant is Death. And not death as an abstraction. No, there's nothing abstract about this. In our case, death seems to be an ever-present reality. We have lost so many dear ones over the last couple of years. Dear ones who have been part of this community for so many years. Dear ones who grew up here, were baptized, confirmed, married and now buried here. And we have lost children too. Parents shouldn't have to attend funerals for their children. Yes, recently it seems like the hits just keep on coming. A number of folks have described to me symptoms and feelings that actually sound like PTSD. It can seem a little overwhelming.

Yet, whether we can quite articulate it this way or not, I do believe that one of the reasons we are drawn together in a community like St. Thomas, which is to say into a Christian community, is because we know something about death.

Why do you suppose that this newly born Christian faith, a faith that was still called The Way, spread so rapidly through the Roman Empire and the Mediterranean world? One reason is because of the loving, compassionate, and hopeful way that early Christians handled death and dying. Unlike their pagan counterparts, who often ignored the dying and disposed of dead bodies in a haphazard way, the earliest Christians demonstrated tenderness and compassion all through the dying process and expressed in faith-filled conviction that death was not the end of the journey. This so impressed their pagan neighbors that countless numbers of them were drawn to the new faith.

A contemporary version of this story is told by the writer and historian Elain Pagels. In the forward to her book Beyond Belief, she tells of a time when her 2 year old son was dying of a rare disease. She was overwhelmed with grief and sadness and anger. She and her family were living in Manhattan at the time and one chilly February Sunday morning, she went out for a run. All she could think about was her dying child. As she was running along in Central Park parallel to 5th Avenue, it began to rain. Seriously rain. Up ahead, she saw a church and she crossed 5th Avenue to seek shelter under the church's porch.

Looking inside, she saw that the congregation was at worship. Without quite knowing why, she was drawn inside and sat down in a back pew. As the words of the Eucharist liturgy washed over her and the people made their way forward toward the altar to share bread and wine, Pagels had a revelation. "These people know something about death", she found herself thinking. About life, too. The church where all this came to her was the Church of the Heavenly Rest, one of Manhattan's beautiful Episcopal churches right at the corner of 5th Ave. and E. 90th St. In the midst of her grief around the too-soon-to-happen death of her 2 year old son, Pagels had found at Heavenly Rest, a community where death was acknowledged, and told all where hope was proclaimed that death is not the end of the story. Grief and loss are not the final verdict. In the midst of death, there is life.

That's certainly one of the important learnings from this morning's gospel reading. Today on the liturgical calendar we observe the Feast of the presentation of our Lord. It was the Jewish Law that every first born male child should be presented in the Temple and designated as holy to the Lord. And so we look in on the scene this morning as Mary and Joseph enter the Temple, and there we meet another man and woman, each of them ancient in years and steeped in wisdom.

Simeon, we are told, is "righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolidation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him." The Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until he had

seen the Lord's Messiah. And on that day, the Spirit's revelation came to pass. With great joy, Simeon took the child Jesus in his arms and praised God.

“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.”

Do those words sound familiar? They are best known to Protestants and Roman Catholics as the “Nunciativus” and we often sing this beautiful canticle at Choral Evensong.

Simeon had led a life of devotion and the Spirit at work in him led him to understand that God was at work in the birth of this baby. At the end of his life, as the Light is going out for him, what does he see in this new life? In this baby? Salvation for all people, a light for the Gentiles, and the Glory of Israel.

And he is joined in this revelation and this blessing by Anna, a prophet who has lived in The Temple for years and who, like Simeon, has been awaiting this revelation. When she saw the child in Simeon's arms, she began to praise God. The child represented all her hopes for the redemption of Jerusalem.

I love this beautiful, multi-generational story. As the end of their lives, Simeon and Anna are blessed to see, in the flesh, in an instant, in arms, all their hopes for the redemption of Israel and the salvation of the whole world. And we're meant to understand that the child Jesus received their blessing and received their devotion and their wisdom too. They have something to offer him too. In the midst of death there is life. And make no mistake, in the midst of Life, there is also Death.

So let's come back here. Here today in our community. Yes, we are experiencing too many deaths. Yes, there is grief and loss and deep sadness. But in the midst of this, we are also experiencing life. Did you know that last year St. Thomas performed the largest number of baptisms of any parish in the Diocese, including St. Mark's Cathedral? Our baptisms exceeded our funerals? You see, in the midst of Death there is life. And I do so deeply believe that in welcoming these new Christians into the household of faith, they represent to those to whom we have said farewell, the hope of the redemption of our broken world and the salvation of all people. I so deeply believe that as the eyes of our dear departed ones have grown dark in this life, that those same eyes are being filled with light in the life to come. This is certainly the great hope of Simeon and Anna just as it is our hope for these dear ones and for ourselves.

I'm now going to take a moment to read aloud the names of these dear ones for whom memorial services or committals have been held here at St. Thomas in the last year or which are currently scheduled to be held in the near future. Please forgive me in advance if I leave any name out. I'm going to invite you to close your eyes and as I read these names, visualize them. See them surrounded by light. Know that they are held in Jesus' loving arms. And know that one day, soon or late, your name will also be read in a place like this and know that you too will be held in Jesus' loving arms.