

Both Simeon and Anna were very old. Like some of us, for whom church is a second family, they practically lived in that famous Temple. Anna had her spot inside the court of the women, while Simeon was the man to see when you had a first-born son and his mother.

The Second Temple was a very grand place. It stood atop Mount Zion, which had been lowered, and the sides built up with gigantic stones. You can see them today. Up on top there was room for eleven football fields. Mary, Joseph, and their forty-day old baby would have climb up one of the stairways leading to one of the gates. The first thing they would have seen was part of the great porticoes that surrounded the plaza. The lines of columns stretched into the distance, supporting a heavy peaked roof. The porticoes were like cloisters or colonnades, open from the sides. The holy family might have passed through one and at least glanced at the treasures King Herod's armies had taken in foreign battles, and when they emerged from the shaded portico, they were in the huge plaza itself.

If they still had some temple coins from their last visit, they wouldn't have to visit a money changer. Just 32 days ago they had brought their newborn for naming and circumcision. They found someone selling birds from cages and bought two. They were much too poor to buy a lamb, which was the preferred offering. I imagine Joseph carried the birds and Mary had the baby. They walked on. To enter the courts of the actual Temple, you had to be Jewish. The vast marketplace they were crossing was called the court of the Gentiles. I'm not sure how security worked, but Jews entered through massive doors set into a wall as tall as this church, and came into another open area, the court of women.

If Joseph was going to offer a sacrifice of his own, or say prayers, or attend a Bible study, he would have crossed this courtyard, climbed a grand, wide staircase, and entered the court of men. Only then could he see the whole Temple building itself, and not being a priest, he could not enter. If God could be said to "dwell" anywhere in particular, as in the days of old when God dwelled on Mt. Sinai or in the portable Tent of the wandering Hebrews, surely God lived here. Or God listened best to prayers made here.

But Joseph was, as usual, not the focus of our story. Mary was, and her baby. This amazing complex of buildings would be the stage for many of his greatest moments, and from their perch in a tall fortification conspicuously overlooking the place, Romans would keep an eye on Jesus, and finally decide they'd had enough of him.

Old Simeon was apparently the priest in charge of presentations and purifications that day. Jesus became a Jew and received his name on the eighth day, but on this fortieth day, he was to be officially presented as the firstborn son of Mary and Joseph. The law dictated that firstborn sons be set apart, as they would have special responsibilities to their families for the rest of their lives. Mothers and sometimes fathers also needed ritual purification after the harrowing event of bringing a child into the world. They weren't "dirty," but they had been bloodied, and Judaism treats blood with great reverence. Ever since the blood of the dying Abel cried out from the ground telling God that Cain had gone ahead and done what God warned him not to do, the blood of our frail species has had a supernatural power.

Maybe the holy family was standing in line, waiting their turn, or maybe Simeon picked them out as they came into the court of women. The story says he was directed by the Holy Spirit, and I picture his eyes widening. Without explanation, he took their baby into his arms. Perhaps he closed his eyes, letting them rest from their decades of searching. *Now, Adonai, let me die in peace. These old eyes have seen what you promised: the one who will enlighten all those gentiles out there and our whole people.* And then he remembered his job. He blessed the parents, ritually bringing them back from impurity and restoring them to full communion with God and the Law of Moses.

It is rare that a prophet gets to see his or her visions come true. The Holy Spirit had told Simeon he would not die until he saw the promised one. And now he had. The parents were amazed. And now, an additional vision came to him, and he told Mary and Joseph what it was: *this child will cause the rise and fall of many, and their private thoughts will be revealed. And he will be rejected. And a sword will pierce your heart.* Yes, Mary, all generations will call you blessed, but that blessing will burden you! Luke does not tell us what happened to their amazement when they heard this second prophecy. Forty nights ago, the shepherds told her about what the angels had said, and she pondered their glorious words in her head. Now she had heavy words to ponder as well.

They had no time to ask the old priest what he meant, however, because Anna drew close to them. Everyone knew Anna. She basically lived in the Temple, and was as saintly as any male priest. She fixed her eyes on the baby for a time and then seconded Simeon's words. *We must be thankful to God, because this one is our redeemer. Jerusalem, behold the one who will save us. Our rescuer.*

Somehow, the new parents found their way out, strangers staring at them, whispering and then talking. Out through security, into the mass of unenlightened gentiles, holding their tiny son. Through the marketplace to the long porticoes, up and down the steps in the shade and back out toward the next gate, then down the great stone ramp, back to whatever place they had lodged or camped. Then home to a normal life in Nazareth, four or five days' walk away to the north.

You went to the Temple to do your duty, sure, but also to meet God. To face the great deliverer of the Hebrew slaves, the one who chose the chosen people, who gave all the details of how to live a good and holy life. How to eat with respect and gratitude. How to marry and bring up a family. How to be an honest business person, a faithful farmer, a student of the Law. At our best, this is why we come to church: no other building houses the same ceremonies, teaching, meditation, encouragement, and tradition. Our health clubs, our favorite resorts, the cabin, while all sacred, are not church. The Lincoln Memorial, the Holocaust Museum, the State Capitol, all are sacred but are not church.

It is tempting to overdo our reliance on architecture, on a certain kind of building, as a place to meet God. I would not be surprised to find that our children's generation continues the secularizing trend begun in Europe and sweeping North America. It may be that very few churches or synagogues get built in the next century, and that faith communities shed their budgetary burdens by meeting elsewhere and no longer hiring expensive professional clergy like us. They will nevertheless meet God and create holy places.

But our forebears thought it best to create these kinds of temples, and if you look around you, you might see the wisdom and even eloquence of all the symbolism. The exposed ribs of the roof remind us of Noah's Ark, a shelter from destruction. Unlike the Temple which demarcated gentile and Jew, female and male, we sit here without distinction. Even though the altar, the pulpit, and the baptismal font are set apart like the fireplace in a grand house, it's not an exclusive platform. As in the Temple, we have a red lantern, candle always lit, reminding us of God's constant presence. The stained glass windows all have stories, and the columbarium in the chapel contains the remains of many beautiful friends and family. There are poetic as well as practical reasons for just about everything here. Like the Temple, a church is a model of how a community and God should connect. Where better to recognize The One?

Just like the Temple, and just like our homes, a church is built to draw us from the outside to the center. From the entryway to the comfy chairs by the hearth. From the mudroom to the kitchen table. From the street to the communion table.

Just as the holy family made their way to the center of their world to present Jesus to God, we make journeys, at important times, to places like this, to find or learn or reveal something. I invite you to think of a place where you found yourself face to face with the truth of your life. It might be a church. For me it was. I guess that's no surprise. Your encounter with reality. With God. With your fate, your despair, your vocation. A place where you were presented or purified or strengthened or broken or embraced. Picture the architecture, the decoration, the things on the walls, the people who were there or not there.

With your eyes closed or not, take your imagination there and look around for a few minutes. Notice the details and perhaps think about what they might mean.

Was there a wise one there, God or another person? An angel? What did they say?

What brought you to that special place?

What did you find, or learn? What burden did you leave there? What burden did you take up?

And if you could compare that moment in that place to our story today, were you most like Mary? Joseph? Simeon? Jesus? Anna? The crowd of puzzled onlookers?

And finally, the soundtrack: was your moment full of music, or conversation, or background sounds, or silence, or what?

I'll finish now by telling you about my moment.

At a dark time in my life as a young man, I was listening to a sermon by a brilliant young priest that I confess I had a bit of a crush on. Feeling pointless and aimless, I sat by myself, and found my eyes focusing on a mosaic way up there, beyond the altar, of an angel pointing toward the risen Christ. I heard Nancy finish her sermon: "*he is there, waiting for you on the other side of silence.*" And I knew it was true. Her words convinced me that my emptiness would end, and I

would find my way. I now know enough to see she was showing us the way of Jesus: after all that turning, learning, praying, and worshipping, there would be a blessing. So we could go on.

Tears came to my eyes and reassurance to my heart, and I knew it was going to be okay if I went ahead with my solitary journey. The silence was not emptiness. I had gotten my blessing.