

Sermon, 1.30.2022, Elizabeth Lienesch (Presentation Sunday, observed)

In the name of God, Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit.

During this season of Christmas and Epiphany, and now today when we celebrate Presentation Day -- the day that Jesus's parents bring their baby to the temple to be part of Jewish rituals of presentation and purification -- I've been thinking a lot about Mary and Joseph.

Perhaps I've been thinking about these two because of my own relatively new parenthood.

Or perhaps because I'm pregnant again and we're expecting our own new baby to be born this summer.

Or perhaps they have caught my imagination because we don't really hear that much about them or about Jesus in the stories of this season -- though the truth is that we can probably imagine how these first-time parents were spending their first forty exhausted, sleep deprived days, and how he, who was just an infant after all, was spending his time -- sleeping and eating and fussing.

But for whatever reason, I've been hooked on Mary and Joseph. And in particular, I have been grabbed by their *openness*. By their willingness to say yes. By the way in which their everyday and surely somewhat mundane lives are occasionally punctured by moments that could only be for them some mix of surprising, terrifying, and wonderful.

Nine months earlier, at what we now call the Annunciation, an angel appears to Mary and tells her she has found favor with God and will have a baby whose kingdom will have no end. Mary's response? Here I am.

Not long afterward, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream to instruct him not to abandon Mary even though she had become pregnant before they were formally married, and also that they should name their son Jesus. And when he wakes up, Joseph does what the angel had commanded. Joseph would have other dreams as well, as when he was told to flee with his small family to Egypt to escape Herod's violence, and later, when he was told to return to Israel following Herod's death. Each time, Joseph listens.

And then there are the Magi -- three total strangers from places Mary and Joseph may never have heard of knock on the door. They have followed a star, they say, to see this brand-new infant king. And instead of politely declining this surprise visitation or asking for some form of identification, Mary and Joseph open the door and invite the foreigners in.

And now, on Presentation Day, we see again Mary and Joseph's everyday lives interrupted, and again we see their willingness to say yes.

Today, they have brought their infant son to the temple for religious rituals. This wasn't an everyday occurrence for them, but it was a ritual that was part of Jewish law and custom. They had arrived in the city and went into the temple just as generations of families had done before them. And yet, unlike other families, Mary and Joseph were met there by two prophets.

There's Anna. Anna has lived in the temple for years, constantly praying and fasting. She sees Jesus with his parents and knows there is something special about this baby. She gathers others around her, telling everyone who will listen that this child is destined to bring the "redemption of Jerusalem."

And then there's Simeon. An old man who has listened to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who has been told he will not die before seeing the Messiah. He too sees Jesus and knows his work has been completed, he has seen Israel's future salvation and can "go in peace." From his words, we get the beautiful closing language in the Episcopal Compline Service – "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."

As for Mary and Joseph, Luke tells us in our Gospel lesson for today that "they were amazed at what was being said" about their baby. For sure. And surely, they were even more amazed when Simeon turns to Mary and says: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There is a wondrous but also disturbing quality to these words, and perhaps to the entire encounter with Anna and Simeon. Once again, as with the angels and the Magi, Mary and Joseph are pulled from their everyday lives into a reckoning with something mysterious, terrifying, and immensely larger than themselves.

And once again, they remain open. They allow the aged Simeon to hold their infant son. They hear his words, and accept his blessing. Rather than trying to dodge Simeon and Anna, people whom it may have been tempting to simply cross the street to avoid, they are open to the words of the prophets, and to both the worry and wonder the encounter may have brought.

So today, on Presentation Sunday, as Mary and Joseph wrap up their visit to the Temple and return with their child to their home in Galilee, and as we begin to say goodbye to them as main characters in our weekly readings, I invite us to remember their spirit of openness and take inspiration from it.

Let us learn from them to expect God's miraculous presence even as we go about the everyday tasks of our lives.

Let us be open, as they were, to accepting the gifts that others might bring us, particularly those gifts that are unexpected or those others who may seem a little strange.

And let us listen to the prophets, both the prophets of old like Simeon and Anna, and the prophets of our own day and age. Prophets like Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu, and Stephanie Spellers, whose writings we heard during our Dr. King service a few weeks ago.

As followers of the way of Jesus, we are called to be open to and even to seek out these encounters with truth-tellers. We are called to listen to the angels, to open the door to the Magi, to stop and talk with strangers who come to us with unexpected and discomfiting messages.

We can do this in many ways – by going out into the world and finding ways to serve others, by finding time for silence in our lives so that we might listen for the movement of the spirit, by building relationships with people who are different from us, and who we know will push us to think differently.

We can do this by asking ourselves some questions about our own lives: “What do you need to say yes to?” And “Where might you be hearing a nudge from a prophet or an outsider or a wise stranger?”

We can do this by continuing to be open to the kinds of questions we began to wrestle with during last week’s annual meeting: what does a vital St. John’s look like? What must we embrace to shape this vision? What must we let go of?

No matter how we do it, I pray that we always remember to be open, to allow our hearts to be pierced. I pray that we find time for holy silence, for listening, and for saying yes. Because it is, I believe, in this kind of vulnerability, this openness, and this welcoming of the unknown that we will find God’s saving action at work in our own lives and in the world around us.

Amen.