

Presentation Sunday  
February 2, 2014  
The Rev. Elizabeth A.B. Tesi

A few months ago, when Holy Cross and I were interviewing each other, I had the chance to visit Holy Cross. I snuck into a service, Martin and I. The sneaking part was actually kind of a bust—so many people said hello and asked me to coffee hour it was really difficult to stay under the radar! (A number of you asked if I was visiting, and if I was going to move here for work. Well...er....)

Bob was preaching that day, and he started with this fabulous Eagles song – Love Will Keep Us Alive. So Bob, before he ever knew me as a colleague, stole my rock song for church. Oh, my goodness. Bob, Bob, Bob...

It's a great song—there's that second verse about how the world is changing, "right before your eyes." And indeed, the world is constantly in flux. Sometimes, it feels as though nothing else in the world is ever stable. We want that assurance that love will sustain us through all our tough times. You and I are together a church in transition. In our own slippery times, what sort of church is God calling us to be?

And today we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple—one of the feasts that actually takes precedence over a regular Sunday. So today is not just business as usual. So what's the big deal? What's the story?

The Presentation of Jesus in the temple is, perhaps, one of my favorite stories. Mary and Joseph have brought their child to the temple to do their duty as Jewish people. It's a grace-filled day. A family is being received fully into temple. Let's think about it: the text begins by telling us "when the time came for THEIR purification" they went to Jerusalem. I've looked into it, and historically, it *is* accurate to say *their* purification. Mary, as a mother, certainly had a rite of purification she was supposed to do 40 days from the birth of her son. But Joseph—when did he become unclean? What ritual purification did he need to do? The law and the purity codes aren't clear. We don't know why Joseph was considered unclean, but we do know that he shared in the need for purification. They went there together. This is a big deal for Luke, as a gospel writer. Keep an eye on it throughout the year: Luke loves to pair things—male and female—so there is balance. Luke is an early-church writer. In this model of balance, he's challenging early church members to a new notion of equality.

In addition to the purification rites, I also love that Jesus is being presented in the temple—like any first-born boy of any Jewish family. Jesus is Mary's firstborn, but he is not Joseph's biological child. Yet Joseph purchased the sacrifices and brought his family on this journey. He completely accepted Jesus and is doing for him exactly as one does for a biological child. Joseph remains one of my favorite saints—the carpenter who spoke with angels. Love transcends simple biology. In the world inhabited by Jesus, being blessed by God is not tied to one's birthright. Everyone enters on equal footing. Joseph and Mary create this family where love has made equals. For a family who had

every reason to walk away from each other—no, to run from each other screaming—miraculous pregnancy, step-dad talking to angels, being hunted down by the authorities, birth in a stable—this family is so far holding it together. God’s love transcends simple birthright and reaches out for us in all our most complicated places.

And now we walk with the new parents as they meet Simeon and Anna. This is another one of my favorite pieces of the story. Simeon is a wise man in Jerusalem who speaks to God as if to a friend. He knows he will not die until he has seen the Messiah with his own eyes. One of the great prophets in the Jewish culture and for us today is a man named Jeremiah. He’s important—we read his words in the funeral service. For a culture of people whose prophet Jeremiah who declared that at the last he would stand up on the earth and with his own eyes see God, seeing with one’s own senses is an important part of the God-human relationship. If you don’t have a kingdom come to believe in, you’d better hope that God fulfills God’s promises while you still live. I wonder how Simeon felt—I wonder if relief flooded him and warmed his soul as he saw the child, Jesus, and knew who he was. I wonder how he knew, but he did. And when he saw Jesus, he gave praise to God. It is an important piece of trust, in a pre-Resurrection world, to have God’s promises fulfilled. It proves that this God-human relationship is not just a figment of our imagination.

Anna is so important, too. We know that there are women prophets, and women church leaders in our scripture. We don’t always know their names or very much about them, and sometimes what we do know is sketchy or one-dimensional. We aren’t told what Anna says about Jesus, but we do know that she has been widowed for a long time, living night and day in the temple. The temple is not the old-folks-home of yesteryear. The custom, rather, was that a young widow would remarry (like Ruth does in the book named for her), or that she would be cared for by her sons. Anna, however, was independent. She would have been continually participating in community and being a valued community member and asset in order to have that arrangement allowed for so long. She would have been known to people in the temple.

Simeon and Anna are the elders of the community, welcoming and celebrating the new family as they come in. Both of them met Jesus as a baby... yet neither one of them would live to see the child grow up. They’d be dying soon. All they knew was the hope and the promise revealed. I wonder if they could imagine what this child would grow up to be—a miracle maker, changing water into wine and feeding five thousand plus women and children and healing lepers, and finally a convicted criminal. No, Simeon and Anna knew only the infant hope. Just so many of our elders today will not be here as many of our babies grow up. Yet this building was built in hope for the community that Holy Cross is.

Doesn’t this feast of the Presentation remind anyone else of our church today? Isn’t it possible that Luke is drawing us a picture of a church community, built in hope, resting in an unconditional love, honoring the elders and recognizing the younger.

Like Simeon and Anna, none of us have seen an adult Jesus in the flesh. They knew only the hope of an infant. We hold Christ as our Messiah, as Lord and Savior, but he’s not here in the body for us to hold and touch. We too share Simeon’s hope when we touch

the Real Presence of God in the bread and the wine. Like Mary and Joseph, we are a community filled with people who bring forth their children in hope. Like Mary and Joseph, we are families and couples who have likely hurt each other deeply. Like Simeon and Anna, we see only a hint of what will one day be.

I hope that in the story of Mary and Joseph, that our parents here today feel empowered. It took Mary at least 40 days after birth to get Jesus to the temple—doesn't that make you feel like you can cut yourself some slack? Joseph treated Jesus as he would his own son—doesn't that give those of us who are not biological parents or who have stepkids hope that the families we are building are just as loved and equal before God? Simeon and Anna, the elders, sang praises to God. Doesn't that give us hope that our elders remain honored and recognized and vital—absolutely vital—to the work we are doing as a church?

The presentation in the temple—it's such a simple story, of a simple rite, and what we hear is a vision of God's power to recognize, love, and honor all parts of the human story. We're given this model of a church community which I imagine would be so vital to our world today—this model that whoever you are—birth mom, adoptive dad, widow, community elder... auntie, teacher, friend, single person—you are vital to this community and beloved to God. We are given this model that whoever we are, wherever we are, clean or unclean, young or old, we are welcome here in God's house to receive God's blessings so freely given.

That assurance and that love is what we cling to when our world feels slippery and out of control. Just like that Eagles song I mentioned—“Now I've found you, there's no more emptiness.” And in the end... “when we're hungry, love will keep us alive.” We are here today because we are hungry, aren't we? We're hungry to be filled with an unconditional love. Well, here's a feast for us. Come, eat, and be filled.