

The Inclusive Gospel for an Exclusive World
Luke 2:22-40

“...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.”

In the Cloisters of San Marco, a museum in Florence that once housed Dominicans of the Order of Preachers, Fra Angelico's fresco of The Presentation of the Lord adorns the double cell at the end of the main preachers' corridor and the beginning of the novices' corridor. That same fresco adorns the front of your bulletin this morning. The biblical figures in the fresco include Mary with her arms outstretched, having presented her first-born son in the temple forty days after his birth; Joseph behind her holding a pair of turtle doves, the designated offering for the mother's purification if the couple is poor; Simeon who has waited his whole life to see the Lord's Messiah; and Jesus swaddled securely in Simeon's hold, a cruciform halo already surrounding his head, his feet in booties likely painted with the same red used to paint the blood which drips from the crucifixes in the novices' cells and to paint the flowers that bloom in Cell 1 of San Marco where Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Then down and to the left of the fresco, Saint Peter Martyr, a 13th century Dominican kneels and, to the right stands a woman who is not the widow and prophetess Anna as I had thought when I sat in the cell over a decade ago, but Blessed Villana, a holy woman known to the citizens of Florence. Both are painted in the fourth mode of Dominican prayer, their right hands open and slightly extended, inviting the preacher who slept and studied and wrote his sermons in this cell to pray for his brothers while meditating on this text in Luke's Gospel. Scholars think that the preacher who was assigned to this cell was the teacher of novices, an educated guess bolstered by the fact that the Feast of Presentation, celebrated forty days after Christmas on February 2, was the day when novices were received into the community.

In the hot Florentine summer of 2004, I sat for hours on a little stool in this double cell trying to see the light that the preacher might have seen, wondering what he was led to proclaim because of his meditation, night and day, on this particular fresco. Back then my own mind was focused on Mary as I rehearsed what she had previously been told about her first-born son by Gabriel and Elizabeth and the shepherds. It seemed to me Fra Angelico had painted her in the time between Simeon's song and his ominous word to her of the deathly opposition this child's light would expose. But now on this forty-first day after Christmas in the winter of 2019, I am thinking about the teacher in Cell 10 and about the nine novices who were settling in to San Marco on the day after the Feast of the Presentation. As the Holy Spirit had rested on Simeon, so the preacher in this cell must have spent his life asking the Spirit to reveal the light of Christ to novices as he guided them in their study of Scripture and doctrine. And because he was a Dominican who saw no separation between contemplation and action, no doubt he was already thinking about where in the world he would send these future preachers to practice seeing Christ's light, through the lens of Scripture and theology, shining through the cracks of corruption and disease, of violence and ignorance, of fear and poverty which marked the everyday lives of Florence's citizens.

Maybe it is because I am getting sentimental, these days, but wrestling with the story of the Presentation of the Lord through the lens of Fra Angelico's proclamation in paint bowed me down anew before the privilege and responsibility of preaching and teaching: of pointing you toward the light of God's love in this child shining through Scripture and so sending you out these doors with eyes to see Christ's light shining still through the cracks of corruption and disease, of violence and ignorance, of fear and poverty that mark our everyday lives.

The light that this Gentile author of Luke-Acts saw in Christ and handed on to us, for his own time and for such a time as this, is the light of the inclusive gospel for an exclusive world.

In the first place, when Simeon sings that his eyes have seen God's salvation prepared in the presence of *all peoples*, a light for revelation *to the Gentiles* and for glory to your people Israel, most of

Luke's readers were not inclined to sing along. Remember that Luke is writing his Gospel with the contentious struggle of the early church concerning the inclusion of Gentiles in mind. Remember as well all the contentious struggles fought since then about who is out and who is in, who is saved and who is damned. According to Fred Strickert, a Lutheran Church pastor who served the Church of the Redeemer in the old city of Jerusalem, the historical context for the Gentiles' exclusion involved the threat to the temple's purity posed by the introduction of Hellenistic culture into Jerusalem before Christ's birth. In an effort to keep the temple undefiled, outsiders not only were restricted to a special section called the Court of the Gentiles but they also risked death if they trespassed. In fact, I am not making this up, a stone wall was built with thirteen notices which read, according to Josephus: "No foreigner is to enter within the balustrade and embankment around the sanctuary. Whoever is caught will have himself to blame for his subsequent death." That very wall "later played a prominent role in the beating and arrest of Paul when he was accused of bringing Gentiles into the temple. It is against this backdrop," Strickert says, "that 'The Presentation [of the Lord]' takes place." It is against this backdrop and against the later story of Paul's mission to the Gentiles, that Luke, a Gentile, has Simeon see and sing about God's salvation of all people, including the Gentiles. The inclusive gospel for an exclusive world.

In the second place, then and now, not only are sanctuaries the most racially segregated rooms on Sunday morning but congregations tend to divide along class lines. The class missing in Luke's story of The Presentation is the priesthood, an omission I had never noticed before now but, once noticed, the omission is glaring. Luke uses two words for temple in the first two chapters of his Gospel. In his first chapter, the priest Zechariah is struck dumb by the angel Gabriel in the temple proper. Only priests could enter the temple proper to offer sacrifices for the people's sin and salvation. In the story of Simeon, the word for temple refers to the outer courts where all others were kept at a distance from God's dwelling place. How incredible, then, that the child in whose flesh God had come to dwell was presented in the outer court to Simeon, a layperson. No longer was salvation in the hands of religion's elite class. Salvation was revealed and held in the arms of everyman! The inclusive gospel for an exclusive world.

In the third place, Luke subtly places women on a par with men in this story, even though male dominance would prevail in the church for centuries. While Luke wants us to know of Mary and Joseph's obedience to the law of Moses, wants us to know that Jesus was raised as an observant Jew, he writes, "When the time came for *their purification*." Normally Joseph would have dropped Mary off at the Court of Women for this rite, but Luke pairs male and female every step of the way--from their entrance into the outer court of the temple for purification to their shared amazement at Simeon's song to their finishing all that the law required of them to their return home. Luke's inclusion of Joseph in the law of purification and his addition of the prophetess Anna signaled a new community in which, as Paul had already written to the Galatians, "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all are one in Christ Jesus." The inclusive gospel for an exclusive world.

Where in the world shall I send you with the inclusive gospel? What lens has Luke given us in this story so that, more and more, we may see God's light shining through the cracks of corruption and disease, violence and ignorance, fear and poverty, racism and greed that mark our everyday lives? God knows we are all novices when it comes to seeing the light and proclaiming the gospel. Preachers wake each Sunday morning as if it were the day after the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, as if we were only beginning. We stare at the story and make an educated guess about its meaning. This is mine: What if the light Simeon is holding in his arms has been born to expose and erase every humanly drawn line in the sand that divides us from one other save for one, says Simeon to Mary: this child is destined to be a sign of God's love that will be opposed or embraced. That is to say, in this exclusive world and on Super Bowl Sunday, if we do pick a side, for Christ's sake, may we pick the side of love. Thanks be to God!