

## The Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Saint Thomas Episcopal Church, Denver  
The Reverend Ruth Woodliff-Stanley  
February 2, 2014

### **Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40**

Recently, my husband and I got into an argument. It was about nothing significant, as many arguments are. As the argument progressed, I was feeling increasingly irritated by what seemed to me an overreaction to a family situation. I, however, had not yet taken the time to hear the back-story I walked into when I discovered the unfolding scenario. Instead, feeling tired and entitled, I moved from calm straight to self-righteous.

The self-righteous me is really not a pretty picture. But the worst of it was yet to come. It came when Nate said something, and I made a sarcastic quip back to make a point I thought was a fine one at the time.

What upset him, though, was not my sarcasm, he told me a little later when we turned the corner from arguing to trying to understand. He said what upset him in that moment was the look in my eyes.

It was a look that he experienced as disdainful, contemptuous. That's what upset him.

And as I turned it over during the trek back from our argument to reconciled relationship, I realized the look is also what upset me.

Our eyes, we are told, are windows to the soul. And, as an aside, those who are not sighted, I have observed, learn to take this function of the eyes into the way they use their voice and the silence between their words. I'm often amazed by how Father Dan can communicate a look of compassion through the use of his voice and the lovely, intuitive spaces between his words.

When we behold someone with our eyes, we are expected to be looking for Christ. So says our baptismal covenant, in which we promise to seek and serve Christ in every person.

Simeon is the patron saint of beholding Christ with our own eyes. This beholding is what creates interior beauty in a person. Simeon sees the Christ child unhindered. He knows he is beholding God's gift to us.

Why do we so often stare right through Christ in the face of whoever is in front of us?

I've been praying about this, turning it over since the recent moment when the light left my eyes in the face of my beloved husband.

My thoughts about this led me to three things that keep us from beholding the Savior: our own idealized fantasies of what God needs to look like to make us fulfilled, our fear of being hurt if we become vulnerable enough to behold God, and our preoccupation with idols.

In my argument with Nate, I was primarily dealing with the first obstacle. I was holding an idealized image of who my husband should be. This image kept me from seeing God's presence in him, trying to deal well with the family situation.

I think we spend far too much time looking for some fantasy picture of what love should be, what strength should be, what will give us delight. All the while, the Christ child is two inches in front of us in the face of someone we say we love, and we miss him. Is it any wonder, then, that he hides his face from us the next time? You see, it's not just the person in front of us in these encounters. It is always the living Christ who is there, too.

At other times, though, we tiptoe up to the moment of the presentation of Christ only to run away at the moment we would behold him, hold him, and depart in peace. But we cannot allow it. The intimacy is too terrifying. Our best love stories speak of this age-old dilemma: whether to risk getting too close and be burned in what the prophet Malachi describes in today's reading as the refiner's fire, or whether to stay safe and cool at a distance. Without the fire, we will eventually freeze, out in the cold, alone. But the fire is so intimate. So much can be revealed about us in our own eyes as we gaze at the other. So, sometimes, we close our eyes and run as fast as we can. Away from the presentation of Christ to us.

And finally, we can miss Christ, even if we are holding him in our arms, when we are preoccupied by our precious idols. Idols have a way of personalizing themselves to individual fancies. Your idols and mine, even if they are in the same broad category, never look just alike. Mine are built to be tantalizing just to me, and yours to you. Which makes it very hard for us to help each other with this one. Because who's going to name their idols for God and all the world to see? Honestly, we prefer our idols in the shadows. Which means we keep our personal inner conflicts to ourselves.

When Simeon is speaking to Mary in the temple, he says, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

This feast day, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, is also referred to as The Feast of the Purification of Mary and as Candlemas.

On this day, we remember Mary and Joseph’s presentation of their baby in the temple as required by Jewish law and Mary’s observance of the Jewish ritual of postpartum cleansing for women. Today is also the feast day of St. Brigid, who is associated with fertility and with roots in pagan rituals celebrating the lactation of ewes. *Those who recall my last sermon on the Sunday of the playoff game might appreciate the fact that I’ve once again managed to introduce the feminine theme of lactation into our spectacular Broncos trajectory...just making sure the scales stay balanced.*

All of the purposes of this feast day have become associated with interior light, hence the use of candles in a celebration of light on this day. As we turn the corner from the deepest recesses of winter, this day signifies our hope that spring will come.

It is a feast day too often forgotten, but much needed. This feast calls you to see Christ presented before you. This feast beckons you to be present, with eyes open to behold Christ. It begs you to forego your idealized fantasies of God; it requires you to move toward the fire of intimacy when your fears would compel you to run away. And it demands you place no idols before the face of Christ.

If what you let yourself see—literally but more importantly, what you see with the eyes of your heart, is Christ in your sister and your brother—even when you are mad, as I was. Even when you are tired or confused or feel betrayed—if what you see is even the smallest glimpse of Christ, then your soul will be illumined, filled with the beauty that comes from such beholding. And all manner of reconciliation and hope will open like Spring breezes before you.

But as Simeon said to Mary, such beholding comes at a cost, a piercing of the soul, a revealing of your inner thoughts that may demand much of you.

Mary bore that cost. She has shown us that it is possible to do so. And that such love, even when agonizing, brings with the soul’s piercing, a shaft of light whose beauty

makes your very life make sense.

So, let your eyes behold Christ before you. Take that risk. Do not let the light depart from your eyes; do not let your soul be overcome by darkness. Let Simeon's prayer resound in your being. "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, a light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people Israel."

Thank God for the piercing of the soul that lets light in and brings the beautiful wound of love.