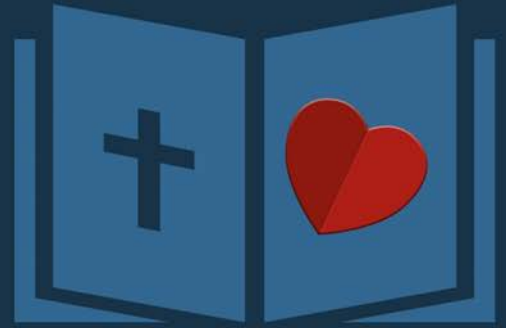


ADULT FORMATION

Word into Life



Presentation of the Lord

Christ Church Christiana Hundred

Sermon by the Rev. David Beresford – February 2, 2025

Malachi 3:1-5, Psalm 84, Hebrews 2:14-18, Luke 2:22-40

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Do you believe in coincidences? I mean the kind of coincidence when you meet someone unexpectedly and you get the feeling that it was meant to happen all along? I remember the time when I lived in England and went to visit my family in New Zealand. I also spent a few days in Wellington, where I used to live. At lunchtime, I went into a café to order a smoothie and, in the line behind me, I heard a voice say calmly, “Hello David. What are you doing here? Aren’t you meant to be in England?”

It was my old friend Bernie. I hadn’t seen him for years. Later I went to dinner with him and his wife. (By the way, this is the only part of my Wellington visit that I now remember.)

Our gospel reading today contains coincidences which seem to be more than accidental. In this reading, we meet two new people. The first is Simeon. We read that “the Holy Spirit rested on him.” He is a man of God and a man of prayer. He is also that rare person in religious life: a watchman. He is watching for the sign of God’s salvation, “looking forward to the consolation of Israel.” The “consolation of Israel” is the salvation that comes through the Messiah.

The other person we meet is Anna, a widow and a prophetess. She is also a person of prayer, spending much of her time at the temple. She and Simeon are like a brother and sister in their Father’s house. They have devoted their lives to serving God there.

Now there comes the day when Mary, Joseph, and Jesus come to the temple. It is forty days since the birth of Jesus. Following the law, they have to make two sin offerings—one for the firstborn child and a second for the purification of Mary to atone for the uncleanness in law of the mother after childbirth. The law decreed that they should bring a lamb as a burnt offering for Jesus and a pigeon as a sin offering for Mary. However, Mary and Joseph were poor, and so the law allowed a pigeon to be substituted for a lamb. So, they brought two young pigeons.

Simeon recognizes Jesus as soon as he sees him. Jesus’ identity was revealed to him by the Holy Spirit. It could be a coincidence, but it has significance for the new parents, especially for Mary. When Mary first said “yes” to God, that was an act of faith. She didn’t know then what the full implications of her submitting to God’s will would be. Today she will learn what her obedience means.

This coincidence also has implications for Simeon. His watching and waiting are now over. For Simeon, Jesus is like a gift who releases him from his earthly vigil. Simeon knew the light of the world had come—he even got to hold him in his arms! He is now ready for death and life in the world to come.

Mary and Joseph weren't expecting this kind of reception. The life of faith is full of surprises! One of the beautiful moments in this story is when Simeon blesses the couple. This act of blessing confers on them God's love and protection. I hope that when I am ready to depart, I will be able to do the same with my own family and friends.

Another coincidence is to do with Anna. She, too, sees the savior of the world, the "redemption of Jerusalem." Anna goes into evangelist mode, telling everyone within earshot whom she has seen. It is in the temple, when Jesus is but forty days old, that the rumors and talk of the Messiah are kindled. Who else was in the temple that day and heard the news? When Jesus begins his ministry as an adult, has the anticipation of his coming already been building between then and now?

There has been much talk lately of unity, but we must also point out that the coming of Jesus creates division. While his message will resonate with many and be welcomed, he will also be, as Simeon says, "a sign that will be opposed." Simeon prophesied that "the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." What this means is that Jesus will bring out the best and worst in people. He will draw out the goodness from the loving soul and show it the path to life. He will also draw forth the anger of those who see Jesus as a threat. The ones who conceal their malice and walk tall will stumble against him.

Was it a coincidence that Mary and Joseph and Jesus met Simeon and Anna in the Temple? Sometimes, there is a plan and a purpose in the seemingly random events of our life. Part of our spiritual development and growth is to understand that when we ask God to guide us, he might do just that.

I don't think it was a coincidence for the young Mary, for God wished her to know what her obedience to God's will would entail. It conferred on her a life of blessings and sufferings. Simeon tells her that "a sword will pierce your own soul too." In some ways, Mary's sufferings parallel those of her son. When Jesus' life was being threatened by the authorities, she would have been worried sick for his safety. At the crucifixion, the nails that pierce Jesus' body find a corollary in the sword of overwhelming sorrow and grief which pierces Mary's soul. For this reason, one of the titles given to Mary is that of *Mater Dolorosa*—Mother of Sorrows.

The Presentation of our Lord in the Temple is more than a personal revelation, however. It is a sign of God's faithfulness to the people of Israel. In the history of their rocky relationship, the Israelites had more than once abandoned the one true God to seek their own ways. Each time they had suffered, and each time they were forgiven. Now the salvation which God had prepared for them was being manifested in this small baby. Imagine that! Those could have been the very words that Anna spoke when she spread the news.

The Presentation of our Lord is significant for another reason. Simeon has announced that salvation will come to Jew and Gentile alike. What this means is that God is no longer the God solely of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is the God of the Gentiles, the God of you and me.

Jesus is the sign of this new covenant, or new testament. Remember what it is that we are being brought into. Not into an "anything goes" kind of salvation. God is still the God of the Jews. The Law is still God's gift for learning to live in righteousness. Gentile Christians understand and know Christ in the context of his origins, which is to be found in the Old Testament, that book of history, poetry, law, and biography.

There's one more person in this story. That person is you. Do you remember any coincidences on your own faith journey? Were there people who crossed your path who helped you to know Jesus? How is God's plan and purpose being worked out in you? Are you a Simeon or an Anna, a Joseph or a Mary? Your own story will have its share of holy coincidences. Through them, the revelation of God is being brought to you.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Questions:

1. What word or phrase in this sermon stands out for you?
2. Mary and Joseph visit the Temple in accordance with the Law. Why is this necessary?
3. "Sometimes there is a plan and a purpose in the seemingly random events of our life." Do you agree?
4. "Simeon prophesied that 'the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.' What this means is that Jesus will bring out the best and worst in people." How does Jesus bring out the best and worst in you?
5. What can we learn from Mary, the *Mater Dolorosa*?
6. What is this sermon calling you to be or to do?