

Presentation of our Lord, Luke 2, January 2020

Here we are this morning, gathered for worship in this place, and for some of us, this is our third day in a row to be here. Between the funeral for Skip Bissell on Friday, the wedding for Joe and Katie Hubbartt on Saturday, and now morning worship followed by an annual meeting today, it's been a full weekend, to be sure. Think about this weekend in the life of our congregation! On Friday we celebrated Skip's life and grieved his death, and we wished him Godspeed into eternity at age 85. Yesterday Joe and Katie got married, both in their 30s, and her two grade school aged children participated in the ceremony. Today we gather to worship, and as part of our service, we presented 2nd grader Sadie Pollard with a Bible, with her Mom handing it to her and her grandparents looking on. What does all of this mean, these events and people of the last 3 days in this church?

It speaks to us of the importance of sacred space, for one thing. Both weddings and funerals, as you know, are happening more and more often outside of the church building. But these both happened within these walls. And I could've just dropped off Sadie's Bible at her house sometime on my way home from work, because we both live in Lakeside, but we presented her Bible here, in the sanctuary during worship. Because sacred space means something.

This weekend also speaks to us of the importance of sacred ritual. Because again—in place of a traditional funeral service, more and more people who have died are just toasted with a drink at the Moose Club or Legion. Weddings can happen in 5 minutes with a justice of the peace or an internet-ordained individual without any ceremony whatsoever. And even if we gave

Sadie her Bible in church here, we might have done so before or after the service without any fanfare. But in each of these instances, not only did the sacred space matter---so did the sacred *ritual*. It mattered that Scripture was read, prayers were said, hymns were sung at Skip's service on Friday. It mattered that Scriptures were read and vows were spoken at Joe and Katie's wedding yesterday. And it mattered that Sadie received her Bible in church this morning, from my hands to her Mom's hands to Sadie's hands, as a sign that God's word comes to her from the congregation and Christy's hands, fulfilling promises made when Sadie was baptized by both the congregation and her parents. Sacred ritual, along with sacred space, matters.

Finally, this weekend speaks to us of generations, of young and old, of families rejoicing and grieving together. We've married, buried, taught, sung, listened, cared, laughed and cried together as young, old, and in between in the course of the events of this weekend. That's what sacred space and ritual provide for us; the opportunity to be together, all ages and generations, to share in the grace of God and the love of fellowship. And that's precisely what our lesson for the festival of the Presentation of our Lord shows us, too.

We don't often get to observe this particular lesser festival, the Presentation of Our Lord. It only happens when Feb. 2, the feast date, happens to fall on a Sunday, as it does this year. I was glad to see that this was the case this year, because this text from Luke 2 is a rich, rewarding text, and it reflects some realities about generations, joy and sorrow, the importance of rituals and worship space that apply very easily and directly to us. Realities that are especially appropriate for us to consider on the morning of our annual meeting after an already busy church weekend.

So let's look more carefully at our text from Luke this morning. Why are Mary and Joseph where they are, doing what they are doing? It's because they were observant Jews. Jewish law prescribed that firstborn sons be presented to the Lord and an offering of thanksgiving and sacrifice be made, at the temple in Jerusalem, according to religious custom. The law also prescribed that a mother, after birth, experience a ritual of purification. Neither of these particular rituals resonates in the same way in the 21st C., and indeed, contemporary Jewish rituals have changed significantly, too. Nevertheless, the point is that Mary and Joseph, in accordance with this custom of their time, made the journey to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill these rituals. Although the presentation of the infant Jesus was not the equivalent of our Holy Baptism, it does bear this similarity to baptism as practiced within the Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations: an infant is brought to the place of worship and in some way consecrated, presented, blessed before and to God. Many diverse faiths around the world have some sort of recognition of gratitude and blessing for new born children before the Divine; it's in our DNA to do so. Mary and Joseph are about this practice, when God intervenes in some unexpected ways, namely, in who they encounter in the temple.

With whom do they meet up in that grand and sacred space of worship? Just some old folks. You know how old folks seem to like to hang around church, right? Same in the 1st C. in Palestine in the Temple, apparently. The young couple with their first born infant encounter two elders who were evidently *not* Scandinavian Lutherans, because they are immediately extremely interactive with this little family they've never met previously. I mean, consider Simeon, an elderly man, nearing death apparently, renowned for his righteousness and his devout faith. The Spirit of God led him to the Temple when Mary and Joseph were there, but we gain

the impression that Simeon spent a lot of time in the Temple. Simeon sees the baby, recognizes that in this child, God is fulfilling a promise to Israel and to Simeon, and he seemingly hastens up to them and actually takes the baby from them into his arms. Simeon, apart from not being restrained by Midwestern rules of polite conduct, is also over his head with elation: God had promised him that he would not die before seeing the Messiah, the anointed one, and now God has kept that promise. Not only does Simeon take this complete stranger's child in his arms, he bursts into a peon of praise, like someone in a musical theatre number. He thanks God that he has been allowed to die in peace, having seen the promised Messiah who will be a glory to the Jewish people but also a light of revelation to the Gentiles: this child matters to the whole world, in fact. Understandably, Mary and Joseph were amazed at these words; even after the various angelic visits and strange circumstances surrounding their son's birth, they are still struggling to get a hold on Who He is. Most parents are trying to get a handle on that with a new baby, especially their firstborn; but Mary and Joseph had a steeper learning curve in that sense than anyone else in history. Simeon blessed the young parents, an excellent idea, in my opinion, because who is in greater need than blessings than new parents? And then he crashes the party of joy and amazement with some rather terrifying words to Mary: "this child will change the world, and a sword shall pierce your own soul, too". Is that what a new mother wants to hear? I don't think so. Those who bring about change to the world generally lead short and volatile lives. Most parents hope for a successful and happy life for their child, not necessarily that their child changes the world. And words about swords piercing one's soul are hardly cheering either. But how true it is that to be a parent means having your heart symbolically pierced by any number of sharp implements throughout your lifetimes together. And again, while this is true for all

parents, it would be particularly true for Mary, who apparently was a widow by the time of Christ's arrest and execution. Imagine the pain and sorrow she had to bear alone! Any mother whose child has died an unjust, untimely, and violent death can understand a bit of the grief Mary will experience. So, Mary and Joseph hear both good and bad news from this elderly man they just happen upon in the Temple. Not at all what they were expecting, I imagine, when they planned the customary trip to Jerusalem.

And the surprises keep coming! Next comes Anna, the prophet, who apparently hangs out at the Temple all of the time as a widow of 84, certainly a great age to attain in that time and place. Anna also approaches them, although perfect strangers, and begins to praise God and speak about the role of this new child in the redemption of Israel. Wow, what a day in the life of Mary and Joseph! Enter the Temple to perform your religious duties and before you know it, strange elderly people are hugging your child and praising God and making some pretty huge statements about your child's future importance. You never know what will happen when you enter a sacred space and engage in sacred ritual, do you?

So, what's wonderful about this story? Here's what I think. We see a young family with a baby in their place of worship. We see some devout elders that welcome and interact with that young family and baby in that place of worship. Both men and women are featured, too; not only are Mary and Joseph both mentioned, but both Simeon and Anna play a part. So, this worship space in Jerusalem is a sacred place where men and women, young and old, come together and interact and exchange blessings with one another. The presence of the baby brings great joy to Anna and Simeon; and these older devout folks of faith offer blessings to the baby

and parents. It's a win/win situation. And I think it is lived out right here, in Knife River, Minnesota, in the year of our Lord 2020.

Let me tell you a contemporary story about a small congregation that, like pretty much every other congregation in the area, was trying to figure out how to pass on their faith effectively to the younger generation. In this case, specifically to three teenagers of confirmation age. The congregation concluded that they needed to think outside the box a bit and find a way to involve adults and teens together in a faith journey. Of course, that presented the challenge of finding adults who might be interested---but over ½ dozen came to the initial interest meeting. And one of the directions that emerged from that meeting was the notion of having an adult mentor, not a family member, for each of the three teens. To intentionally be a friend in faith to for them. And those three mentors were found. And while the confirmation experiment is a work in progress, it is underway and having an impact! Who would have thought? The Spirit of God must be guiding those intergenerational interactions, just as the Spirit led Simeon and Anna to encounter Mary and Joseph and Jesus 2000 years earlier across the world in ancient Israel.

This is, of course, our story. Our story in regards to confirmation and also our story in regards to our simple existence. Here we are on Sunday mornings, and sometimes on a lot of other days, too, gathered as young and old, as men and women. We don't all look the same, think the same, vote the same, or even necessarily believe identically the same. But, we are the family of God in this place, and both genders and all the generations meet and are blessed here. And certainly we wouldn't want it any other way, and neither would our Lord!

I find in this text great encouragement for our community of faith, especially as we have our annual meeting and as we engage in mission planning. We are providing that sacred space for those Spirit led individuals to encounter one another, just as the Temple did in our text. And maintaining a church isn't nothing! We have put not just money, but time and energy and love into creating and maintaining this place of worship, both indoors and outdoors. And there's a reason for that; strange and wondrous things can happen when you spend time in a sacred space and engage in sacred rituals. God has an opportunity to work in your life, to bring people unexpectedly together who would not otherwise come together, to grace you with inspiration or a new idea or guidance or comfort. All that happens here, in this sacred place where we engage in sacred rituals. Let's face it; there is a unique quality of sacred tradition, experience, and history in this place that cannot be replicated anywhere else on earth. This is where your grandmother was baptized or your mother buried or your son confirmed or your parents married. It matters to observe these sacred rituals within this space and among this family of faith. This reminds me how valuable it is just to show up sometimes. I mean some Sunday mornings we don't feel inspired or the weather is lousy or whatever....but just showing up is valuable. Because we don't know how God may bless us by being here or how God may use us to bless someone else by our being here. The importance of this sacred place, of sacred ritual, and of our community of faith is deeply affirmed in this text. And it is deeply affirmed in the events of this weekend, where we grieved together, celebrated together, learned together, laughed together, worshipped together----all in this sacred space, and all involving sacred ritual. That's why we're here! So that the old may bless the young, and the young may bless the old, and there is a place for all of any age or gender to come before God. That's how we bring the story of this text alive for Knife

River, Minnesota in the year 2020. That's how we answer God's call to us. That's how we beat as the heart of the community. Amen.