

Luke 2:22-40

Presentation of the Lord

February 4, 2024

A poem, by E.E. Cummings.

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes  
  
(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun's birthday;this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings:and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)  
  
how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?  
  
(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)<sup>1</sup>

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1 E.E. Cummings, “i thank You God for this most amazing,” in *Xiape* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950).

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Anna's ears and eyes are open, but they are dimmed by age, being at least eighty-four at a time when there are no optometrists and no eyeglasses. Simeon likewise seems to be an old man, for we are told he cannot die until he sees the salvation of Israel. Immortality in a young man is a blessing; immortality in an old man, possibly not so much.

Anna is a woman of great faith and religious observance, worshipping in the temple with fasting and prayer night and day. Simeon is a man who is very open to the wisdom and the movement of the Spirit. Together – woman and man, within the Temple and without – they symbolize the entirety of faithful Israel – a nation waiting faithfully for the promised salvation of God. A nation that waits and waits and waits for the salvation of God, grown old and tired and dim of eye and ear in the waiting.

Simeon lives among the regular people and busy-ness of Jerusalem: the hustle and bustle, the press of the crowd, the noise and smells of the street, the steady stream of people coming up to the Temple. Anna is always in the Temple, which is at least more orderly and regimented. Still, there are always people coming for worship, or for this or that ritual observance – like this woman with her son, from Nazareth. She is coming for her ritual purification bath after childbirth, and Jesus, to be ritually redeemed from God

– for according to the law of Moses, every firstborn male child belongs to God and to God’s service.

Busy-ness. I feel their busy-ness. I feel your busy-ness. I spent a week away from my familiar routine, a week of intense learning and thinking and reflecting. It was not a week of quiet contemplation, but at least I could get above all the hustle and bustle, and survey all of the work we do with a different perspective. I had the aid of colleagues, and professional clergy coaches, and books on leadership theory. I got back a week ago yesterday, and almost immediately was plunged back into the busy-ness of emails and annual reports and a Cluster meeting and a funeral and a thesis proposal and, and, and, and.

Back into the busy-ness of the world, which I am sure you also know all too well. It is a world which does not have time for ritual.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish ritual that filled the life of Anna and Simeon, and the life of Mary and Joseph and Jesus, or the Christian monastic traditions of regular prayers to mark each part of the day, seem increasingly alien to our secular life and, in some cases, even offensive.

In the only class Jennifer and I had together in seminary – religious pluralism – we visited a synagogue, and were shown the *mikvah*: the modern incarnation of the bath which Mary would have used to purify herself. Many of us found the concept of ritual

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2 Brian P. Stoffregen, “Luke 2.22-40,” CrossMarks Christian Resources, <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/luke2x22.htm>, accessed February 1, 2024.

impurity offensive, especially the idea that childbirth would make a woman (but not her male partner) unclean for forty days. The idea that the period would be double if the child was female seemed even worse.

I hope I can do justice to the synagogue leader's explanation. He told us that the word "unclean" may lead us to misunderstand the thinking behind it. Anything to do with life and death – menstruation, childbirth, death, and the like – are charged with energy and meaning. Menstruation – the result of an unfertilized egg – means that a life which might have come to be, has not come to be. Childbirth brings new life into the world, and death is life's ending. Anyone who has thus come face to face with life and death denies their sacredness if they carry on their life as if nothing has happened. The ritual of the mikvah is not a cleansing of dirt or sinfulness but rather an acknowledgment of sacredness. The mess and blood of life and death are holy.

The mess and blood of life and death are holy.

The mess and blood, the smoke and noise and stress of everyday life are holy. Simeon's praise to God as he holds Jesus – "now you are dismissing your servant in peace" – is known as the *Nunc Dimittis* in Latin. It is the traditional prayer after communion. In the ordinary things of wine and bread we have seen the salvation of the world, and now we can go in peace. It is also the traditional song for the service of

Compline: the final liturgy of the day before the community goes to bed.<sup>3</sup> “Now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation.” What is the salvation that my eyes have seen today? What is the salvation that my ears have heard, that my hands have held, that my lips have tasted today

*Everything.* Everything that crossed my path today, is saving, is holy, is a sacrament: a visible sign of God’s invisible grace.

But still, it overwhelms us.

What if...what if we don’t come to church to *find* the holy, but to *reflect upon* the holy? What if this amazing day -

the leaping greenly spirits of trees

and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything

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- is so overwhelming that we need to pause so that our souls can process it? So that we can put rituals around it to help us grasp it? What if our Jewish cousins have it right? What if life outside the church is not devoid of meaning, but, rather, so *charged* with meaning and sacredness that we need some way to earth that energy?

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3 Stoffregen, “Luke.”

Our Gospel passage says that Mary and Jesus came for *their* purification, which is Luke's shorthand for speaking about both rituals: Mary's purification and Jesus' presentation. For the default was that the firstborn son belonged to God: that is, was dedicated to God's service, for example as a priest in the temple. The offering of two young pigeons – a poor family's offering – redeemed or “bought back” Jesus from God. But hold on, if Jesus is God's messiah, God's chosen one, God's pre-eminent servant on Earth, why should his family be redeeming him? Shouldn't they instead be handing him over to God with celebration, dedicating him to God's service like the boy Samuel? Shouldn't the holy Son of God be serving before the Holy of Holies, in the Temple?

Maybe not. Maybe the real holy place, the place where God is known in the raw, in the flesh, in the powerfully electrically charged reality of life and death, is out there, in the busy-ness and in the crowds?

Rituals do not make us holy; instead, they awaken the ears of our ears and open the eyes of our eyes. They enable the work of the Spirit, through which God's faithful people like Anna and Simeon perceive and declare what God has done and is doing and will do *out there*: in my life and in your life, in male lives and female lives and trans and nonbinary lives, in queer and straight lives, in black and white and all lives, in our emails and in our meetings, in the leaky roof and the tax forms: in which the

tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
comes to know unimaginable God.