

Presentation of Christ in the Temple:

The Feast of Candlemas

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

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Malachi 3:1-4 / Psalm 24:7-10 / Hebrews 2:14-18 / Luke 2:22-40

*May the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight,
O God, our strength and our redeemer.*

Happy Groundhog Day! It's my mother's favorite holiday because no gifts are involved. How many of you celebrate Groundhog Day? Does anyone know what Punxsutawney Phil's conclusion was?

Who knew that Groundhog Day is a Christian holiday? It is indeed a Christian holiday *because* of Candlemas! And what is Candlemas? It's the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. And why was Jesus presented in the Temple on His 40th day of life? Jewish Law in Leviticus 12 requires that a woman who gives birth to a boy is unclean for 7 days and remains "*in the blood of her purification*" for 33 days. Double that is she bears a girl. So, being a good mother, Mary brought Jesus with her to the Temple where she bumped into Anna and Simeon.

Fast-forward 300+ years, this being one of the earliest festivals in the nascent Church, and we find clergy blessing candles on this day, as we did with our newly refurbished candles, because candles are a symbol of Jesus the Light of the World. This custom is then observed in Germany. The Germans realized – through centuries of scientific data, I'm sure – that if the sun appeared on Candlemas, a hedgehog would cast a shadow, resulting in a "second winter".

Then, in the 1800s boatloads of Germans immigrate to Pennsylvania, where there are no hedgehogs, but there are groundhogs. They're blessing and lighting candles, looking for the groundhog's shadow. And I'm sure the lapsed Christians were like ... "*Let's just do the groundhog part of it and then go to brunch.*" Thus,

the holiday of Groundhog's Day was first celebrated in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, in 1887.

Fast-forward to today, and we have this national holiday that the rest of the world thinks is weird, that cynics criticize for being anti-science, involves no presents, we don't get the day off, and it only really matters in one small town in Pennsylvania. But we all say, "*Happy Groundhog Day!*" and its history is steeped in today's Gospel story.

In today's Gospel story, 3 main things are happening:

- Mary is being purified after childbirth;
- Jesus is being presented to the Lord; and
- Simeon's prayers have been fulfilled and he can now go in peace.

Reading this story made me think:

- What does it mean to be purified?
- What does it mean to be presented?
- What does it mean to be fulfilled and to go in peace?

Just as in Leviticus 12, the idea of "purification" is an indication that one is unclean – not just dirty, but inherently unclean. That's not a good feeling. It did and still does come with shame, alienation and exile.

What could it possibly mean to you today to be impure or unclean, in need of purification? In modern American culture, I'm tempted to think that most instances of someone feeling impure or unclean is because of the *societal stigma* placed on whatever it is that makes them feel that way. Whether the rules are written or unwritten, society's attitude has a great effect on a person who doesn't conform, in whatever way.

I remember the first year of COVID-19. In the early days, contracting COVID was shocking, and everyone was sympathetic and nervous. After Lockdown, though, around late Summer 2020 through to the end of the year, contracting COVID meant that you were irresponsible and putting the health of the public in danger: You were unclean in more than contracting COVID; you were unclean in your behavior and intentions; you were selfish and reckless. Only quarantine and suffering could purify you.

That was a terrible time, and many of us treated one another very badly. So, take that example that we all witnessed, and translate that to the issues around those who are aggressively being forced to feel unclean: those who might fall in the category of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion or **DEI**. That may be a foreigner, or a person of color, or gender non-conforming, or a veteran, or an amputee. For no reason other than being who they are, a portion of our society deems them unclean and impure and that giving them opportunities to succeed – even when based on merit – is the root of all evil. We are turning back the clock on 60 years of coming closer and closer to respecting the dignity of every human being, so, what are we to do? So, how do we help those who are being made to feel unclean feel like the purified and whole person that God made them?

Those in the 11 Federal Protected Classes and the 18 California Protected Classes are not impure or unclean. They are beloved children of God. Your love and support, you living your Baptismal Covenant to respect the dignity of every human being can be the *healthy and holy* purification they are seeking.

Anyone who watched *Bridgerton* will be familiar with the old-fashioned custom of aristocratic young women being *presented* to society. And while that sort of being presented isn't really part of SLO culture today, we still have customs of presentation: to the in-laws, to a social or professional group, a job interview, or even to your church at such rituals as Confirmation, Reception, and Marriage.

Being presented comes with certain insecurities. I'm sure we can all think of times in our lives when we were presented in some way. The anticipation of what that would look like came with some anxiety.

I remember a sort of presentation when I had to meet the Bishop of Huntingdon after my Selection Conference as a final act before he decided if I were to receive his support for ordination. I had never met the man, which is odd for an Episcopalian. Here, someone discerning a call to ordination would know his Bishop quite well. In England, this moment is the first time many meet their Bishop.

I was given a lot of tips by people who knew him: he was very tall and had a deep voice; he was hard to read; he was very decisive. So, I got on the 4hr train from Manchester to Cambridge because I was on a summer placement. I spent the night in my room in the seminary. I got on the train to Ely. Went nervously to his office, trying to be resigned to any outcome. He never stood up, so I didn't get intimidated by his stature. He asked me a couple of questions, and I was there less than 15min. Then 4hrs back to Manchester. Even though this was a critical meeting that needed to occur, this was a ritual of presentation meant to instill humility.

So, in what ways are you presented in life today? And what is the purpose of that presentation?

Being fulfilled and going in peace are subjects that I have been actively promoting for about 15yrs now. The "being fulfilled" part has not so much to do with me, but with you. What does being fully fulfilled in life mean to you? But the "going in peace" part has been a part of my work in making better funerals. Before, during and since my time on the Church of England's Funerals Working Group, I have been encouraging people to give some considerable thought to what it means to have a good death and to plan their funerals.

WOW! You wouldn't believe the amount of negative reaction there is to the idea of thinking about your death and your funeral! There's an odd cultural phenomenon – or superstition – that people think that talking about their own death will hasten it! It will not!

I learned from a Hospice Chaplain in England – where the hospice movement is much stronger than here – that hospices are not places where people go to die. Hospices are places where people go to live out the rest of their lives. Those who work in hospice try not to use the first sentence at all. They focus on hospice as a place to live out the rest of your life.

In a way, that mindset is like Simeon's response in today's Gospel. In seeing the Messiah, his life was fulfilled – his life had been lived out and he could now go in peace.

The Song of Simeon or the *Nunc Dimittis* is a reminder that your life should be fulfilling. What does that mean? Hopefully it doesn't rest in material wealth, but in spiritual health, healthy relationships and contributions to society. It could include your bucket list. But I think that it's kind of the wrong way around: Reflect on what it means to you to go in peace *first*, and then work backward on how to live your life so that you can go in peace the way you hope to.

There are lots of ways to look at this, but ultimately, you won't know what it means to be fulfilled and to go in peace if you don't reflect on it because you think it's morbid...and by definition, it is morbid. But reflecting on what it means to go in peace may give you peace.

Today's Gospel is more than just an historical account of a moment in the life of Jesus. We study our sacred texts in order find meaning in them for ourselves in our contemporary contexts. So we reflect on the *event* of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and we try to find ourselves in the story:

- What does it mean to be purified?
- What does it mean to be presented?

- What does it mean to be fulfilled and to go in peace?

While we reflect on these questions personally, we also find that, in our most basic life as a Christian, we have been purified, presented to the Lord and fulfilled to go in peace through our Baptism.

Punxsutawney Phil's only moment is today. When he sees his shadow or not,

His eyes have seen his salvation, which has been prepared in the presence of all people.

He is done for the year. This is Punxsutawney Phil's and Simeon's bucket list moment! They can go in peace.

As you reflect on:

- What it means to be purified;
- What it means to be presented; and
- What it means to fulfilled and to go in peace;

Even though the rest of the world might think it's weird, it involves no presents, you won't get the day off, and it only really matters to you, remember that because of Jesus' life and Passion and through your Baptism you are still designated "*holy to the Lord*".