

Sermon: Becoming Beloved Community
The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Year A
Luke 2:22-40

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Today is a lot of things! It is the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, also known as the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It's Candlemas. It's Epiphany. It's Golden Ladle day – hurray! It's Super Bowl Sunday! And, of course, it's Ground Hog Day. Yes, today is a lot of things. And I want to add one more idea to today.

Today we begin our focus on “Becoming Beloved Community,” a vision that I hope we will continue to explore in various forms in the weeks and months to come. The concept of the “Beloved Community” was popularized by Martin Luther King, Jr. He envisioned the Beloved Community as a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of one's fellow human beings. The “Beloved Community” also describes a society in which all are embraced and none discriminated against. The National Episcopal Church and our Diocese have embarked on a long term commitment to racial healing, justice and reconciliation. At Emmanuel I hope we will all be a part of that same long term commitment to learn, reflect and grow as part of God's Beloved Community through our liturgy, preaching, teaching, singing and relationship building.

Today's Gospel reading has Jesus, Mary and Joseph coming to the Temple to fulfill Jewish law that required the child Jesus to be presented forty days after he was born. They encounter Simeon and Anna, both prophets, both moved by the Holy Spirit to testify to the truth of who the baby is, to proclaim that this baby is the Messiah. They have both been listening, praying, watching and waiting for a long time to see this child. Imagine these two elderly people with wrinkled hands and faces with spirits that sparkle recognizing this smooth-skinned newborn as the Christ child.

The Scripture tells us Simeon took Jesus in his arms, praised God and said, (I'm using the version in our Prayer Book) “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 whom you have prepared for all the world to see, a Light to enlighten the nations and the glory of your people Israel.” Some of you recognize this as the *Nunc Dimittis*, the Latin form of the first two words in the song. We use it as a canticle in several of our worship liturgies.

It is a beautiful but poignant scene and song, acknowledging Christ coming into the world to redeem Jew and Gentile, where all are embraced as God's people. The elderly Simeon is now ready to go, ready to die, ready to move off stage, to depart in peace, as he holds this six week old baby boy, this baby who is the consolation of Israel, the redeemer. The *Nunc Dimittis* marks a key moment in salvation history. The words that follow it foreshadow what is to come: “This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” The “inner thoughts of many” implies human resistance and rejection; and the sword of division will also cause pain for Mary and her family.

Simeon expresses a hard (difficult?) truth. All of this will come at a great cost. Jesus will bring truth to light and all who meet him will have to make a decision. Biblical scholar Fred Craddock writes, “Jesus precipitates the centrally important movement of one's life, toward or away from God. As much as we may wish to join the name of Jesus only to the positive, satisfying, and blessed in life, the inescapable fact is that anyone who turns on light creates shadows.”¹ Simeon recognizes this shadow side of Jesus' life and redeeming work. Both Jesus and Mary will pay a dear price, for Jesus – his life, for Mary - the unnatural work that many of you here in this congregation have done yourselves, of burying a child.

¹ Craddock, Fred B., *Interpretation: Luke*, John Knox Press, 1990, p.39

Just as Simeon and Anna recognized the Christ when they saw him, we are called to look for the image of God in one another. The Beloved Community is the body within which all people can grow to love God and love the image of God that we find in our neighbors, in ourselves, and in creation. It provides a positive, theologically and biblically based ideal that orients the work of racial healing, reconciliation, and justice. It is the end toward which the Jesus Movement points.

https://episcopalchurch.org/files/bbc_where_you_are_1.pdf Can you turn to your right and left, carefully look at that person and say, "I see Christ in you." O.K. I know this is a little awkward for some of us! Thank you. Now imagine yourself saying this (maybe not out loud but in your heart) to someone who is of a different sexual orientation, or skin color, or religion, someone who is a drug addict or who is incarcerated, or to someone who doesn't like you, or who annoys the heck out of you? "I see Christ in you." And be ready to have your heart changed?

To become Beloved Community we need to bring truth to light, to see with another's eyes, to be confronted with another's reality. When we denigrate others we damage the image of God. To become Beloved Community we must be open and vulnerable, willing to say "I am sorry for the hurt I have done to you," on an individual basis and on a corporate basis. In order for us to understand where we are historically today, we must learn our history. We need to know that our history books are not without flaws, often written from a particular perspective.

To become Beloved Community we need to bring a different perspective to the monologue of history. It is time, way past time, to shine light on black history, to illuminate that which has so often been dismissed, neglected, distorted, ignored, suppressed, hidden, or buried. We shine light on it not just because it is black history, but because it is American history. It is our collective history. Without acknowledging the truth of the damage that has been done over the past 400 years through persistent racial inequality, lack of economic opportunity and systemic racism, we can't move forward toward healing and reconciliation. We say, in theory at least, this is a nation where all people are created equally. While that statement is beautifully true in God's eyes, it is often not true in our practice. And, it rarely has been. People of color, the disabled, the poor and women in general, have been discriminated against since the inception of this country. Can we open ourselves up to find other perspectives on history, laws and policies? Are we willing to consider our own perspective is not the only one worth listening to?

This precious baby that Simeon held, this baby born a Middle Eastern Jew, the one that would grow up to redeem us, was in all likelihood, a baby of color. If we're going to take Jesus seriously, if we are going to become Beloved Community, we must be willing to tell and hear the truth, the blessed truths and the hard truths, and be willing to not only see God's face in the other but to move toward healing, reconciliation and justice for all. As Simeon knew, shining light creates shadows. We also have to recognize that sometimes living into Beloved Community will cause some around us to be offended, to be angry, and even to hate us. And we must love them, too.

Today is a lot of things. Will it be the day we commit to become Beloved Community, where all are embraced and none discriminated against, a day we commit to love one another, no exceptions?

Amen.