



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Light To Enlighten The Nations - And Us

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

February 2, 2014

You might think that this is just Ground Hog's Day or Super Bowl Sunday. But no; it is much more than that. This day has at least 3 other names, The Feast of the Presentation, The Purification of Mary, and Candlemas. It is a Major Feast on the church calendar, hence the white and the choir in their festive red. This is a rare day in the church calendar. The Feast of the Presentation, one of the church's major feasts, hasn't fallen on a Sunday since 2003 and so it has been that long since these lessons have been heard here. They have bumped the usual readings for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany right out of our bulletin. They have an important story to tell. And that story is complex and complicated. There is a lot going on here.

It all begins with the Jewish laws pertaining to women and childbirth and first born sons. While we may use words like pure and spotless about Mary, she was considered ritually unclean after giving birth. She had to wait a proscribed number of days and then go to the priest in the Temple and make an offering. The preferred sacrificial offering was a lamb but those without means are able to offer two birds instead. That is what Mary and Joseph did. They made the 5 mile walk from Bethlehem to the big city and the grand Temple on Mt. Zion. That's the Purification of Mary part of today.

They had another reason for going. Jesus was a first born son. There is a ritual redemption after a first born male child is 30 days old. This connects to ancient traditions of giving of the first fruits. You are always to give your first and your best in thanksgiving to God. There is also the final plague to have been visited upon the Egyptians - the death of the all the first born. First born sons were consecrated to God in thanksgiving for having been passed over. They became the priestly class. Eventually, the descendants of Aaron, Moses brother were designated as priests for all of the Jewish people and the five silver coins, paid for the redemption of the first born, went to those who would serve in his place. He was redeemed for life outside of the priesthood. I told you that this story is complex it's also ironic.

The third designation for this day is the Feast of Candlemas. In the Song of Simeon, the child brought to the Temple was recognized as "the light to enlighten the nations." It is an ancient tradition of the church to hold a candle-lit procession, where people would bring their candles to church to be blessed for the coming year, and to celebrate the Light of the World. Because February 2nd is half way between the winter solstice and the spring equinox, this day is sometimes considered the beginning of spring, the time of new life. Puxatawny Phil is just the American iteration of an animal forecasting the start of spring. In Germany, it's a badger.

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All of this is just the background for today. Up until this story, as Luke tells is, the only people who have encountered Jesus were those who did so at the prompting of celestial beings or events. The shepherds were sent to the stable by the angel and the magi followed a star. He was first introduced to the dregs of society and to outsiders. Now he is taken out for all to see. It's up to his own people to recognize him. It's up to us. This recognition comes in two stages. First Simeon, a devout man weary of the plight of his people and the condition of the world, has carried a promise that he received in prayer. He was assured that he would see the proof of God's care and plan for us all. He would see the Christ - God's template for humanity. He wasn't told to look for a baby or a warrior. He just waited until he was prompted by the spirit to head on over to the Temple. And then he knew. With an awareness that others apparently didn't have, he saw with his heart, the presence of the divine that had come into the world. And he knew that something had changed and he took the child in his arms. You can imagine tears in his eyes as he expressed his gratitude to God for having let him have such a moment. But he was also given clarity about how the world would react. The powers of darkness in this world do not want the Christ light to inspire people to freedom. The violent response would wound Mary and continue wounding the innocent to this very day.

But the battle is not lost because the second part of this day of recognition comes with the prophet Anna. She was an old woman, a widow for a long time, not necessarily someone with a following. But that day she began to speak, to spread the good news. God has kept the promise. We are not abandoned. Do not lose hope. That's how the Christ light works. It empowers. It gives courage. It inspires. And regardless of how hard the world tries to blot it out, it is inextinguishable. And here are some examples of it.

Christmas Eve, 1914, battle weary soldiers, both German and British, put down their weapons and shared Christmas in the field in Belgium. They shared photos of their families, played a bit of soccer, sang carols together. They forgot that they were supposed to hate each other. Later, knowing that they would be less effective killing machines, their superior officers, replaced them with troops not afflicted with the Christ light.

White supremacists were terrorizing the community of Billings, MT in 1994. Violent attacks against anyone who wasn't white, Christian, or straight were common. A local business owner replaced one of his billboard ad with a message; "Not in our town! No hate! No violence!" Others were inspired to join in and people gathered to paint over hateful graffiti. And then churches and homes began to display menorahs. The light had come and the violence ended.

Two years ago in Berlin, Rabbi Daniel Alter was walking with his six year old son. He was approached by a young man who noticed his kippah, and proceeded to beat him and threaten his son. In the days that followed, kippot were seen everywhere, even local politicians appeared dressed as their Jewish neighbors. Women in Sweden had a similar response after a

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Muslim woman had her head scarf torn from her before she was brutally beaten. The women took to Twitter and Instagram, posting pictures of themselves in Muslim garb.

Back in 1996, when the Ku Klux Klan came to Ann Arbor, MI for a rally, the 17 Klans men were met by over 300 protestors, including Keshia Thomas, an 18 year-old black high-school student. The crowd turned on a bystander with SS tattoos on his arms and chased him and caught him. As he was being kicked and beaten by the crowd shouting "kill the Nazi" Keshia threw herself on top of him and saved him with her own body. Later when asked about what she had done, she said, "I knew what it was like to be hurt. The many times that that happened, I wish someone would have stood up for me. Nobody deserves to be hurt, especially not for an idea."

In the weeks following the suicide bombings that killed 100 people in a Christian church in Pakistan, 300 Muslims gathered to form a human wall of protection around St. Anthony's Church. Mohammad Jibran Nasi told a reporter, "Well the terrorists showed us what they do on Sundays. Here we are showing them what we do on Sunday. We unite."

The light that enlightens the nations reveals the truth - we are all one. We are all the family of God. We have it in us to overcome anything that we think divides us. We lost Pete Seeger this week, but he left us the words to sing. "We shall overcome", as well as, "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine."

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