

## Presentation of our Lord 2025

I have been preaching from this pulpit for over twenty years. 99 percent of the time I choose the Gospel text appointed for the day... because, well, it's the Gospel. It's permissible to preach on the Old Testament texts, or the letters of Paul, or even the Psalms, but my default has always been the appointed reading from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. As you know the readings are appointed over a three year cycle... the church's way of assuring us that we get a good healthy dose of the proverbial "Good News." Having been doing this for a long time, I now have the luxury, when preparing a sermon, to look back at what I preached on the same text, the last time it appeared in the Lectionary. Some of those sermons are pretty good... some, well, not so much. Sometimes, I find that my theology, as well as my interpretation have changed, evolved over the years. One would think that over twenty years I would have preached on every single appointed Gospel, but today's text, The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple in Luke, to my surprise, is an exception. I've never had the chance to preach on it. So today, I'm starting from scratch... some homiletic "new ground," if you will.

So let's do what I do when approaching a scriptural text. Let's step back and look at Luke's principal themes... his agenda, as it were, and, of course, the all-important context. It goes without saying that the several Gospels are decidedly different, different perspectives, differing points of view. The depiction of Jesus in the four Gospels is more, shall we say, a collage, than it is a unified narrative.

There are three principal themes in Luke. The first is that with the coming of Jesus, there is a new world order in the making, an economic, social, and political reversal, as it were; a reversal in which the rich are put in their place, and the poor are raised up; that coercion and violence will give way to peace and well-being; that the world's abundance will be shared instead of hoarded. This theme emerges in the prologue of Luke in the prophetic words of Mary, Jesus's mother. Luke is reading his world and projecting its significance on this birth. The writer's world, in the late First Century, is a world occupied by Empire... a world abused and plundered by the powerful... violence and coercion its calling card. It is a rigid hierarchical system in which the elite few have all the wealth, and thus, power, while the vast many of the empire languish in a desperate mode of survival. That's the context.

The second theme, and one often overlooked, is that the Jesus movement begins deep within the institution of Judaism. In other words, this awakening is nothing new for First Century Jews, it is but another renewal of the people of Israel, a new way ahead in the face of an oppressive and contentious world. The whole of Israel's biblical history has to do with the death and rebirth of the social order; its recurring death and recovery from abuse of power, and the violence and shame that abuse engenders. Israel's very hope as a people is the ever beckoning possibility of a new, and gracious, and sustainable way ahead. Luke wants us to know that Jesus is Kosher; that he speaks from

within the framework of Jewish thought and theology. He is born into the institutional status quo. The ethos of the Jesus movement is a re-articulation of Judaism.

The third theme, and perhaps the most important, is the evocation of prophecy... moreover, the life-giving necessity of prophecy... again, that's a recurring theme throughout Israel's biblical history. It was the persistent legacy in the life of the Judean people, that their prophets spoke out against the abuses of power; that they were ever reminding the powers that be that the hallmarks of a sustainable society are justice, and hospitality, and compassion, and mercy. Prophecy for Luke, as he extends his narrative into the Book of Acts... Prophecy becomes the vocation of the church... The Church, the people who gather in God's name. Prophecy, you of course know, is not so much about foretelling the future. Prophecy is about speaking and acting for the truth. Truth, my sisters and brothers, is our vocation.

These themes coalesce in our reading for today. Jesus we are told is a card carrying Jew. He and his family have met the liturgical requirements that make him a member of the institutional household of God. And the household of God, at this time and place in the first century, is set in the context of imperial occupation of the land. The hope of his people is that there will be a way ahead upon which the occupied people, his people, may reclaim their viability, their dignity and well-being, and worth.

I want to suggest that there is in this passage a dynamic tension between Jesus's institutional roots and his call to the prophetic legacy of his people. Luke sets this scene

in the Jerusalem Temple, the pinnacle of the religious institution.... And you will remember that later in this Gospel, Jesus will say to his disciples that no stone of the Temple will be left upon the other... that it will be thrown down... that the institution will crumble. Indeed throughout this Gospel, Jesus is at odds with the institution; church and state. His combatants are the Pharisees, the scribes, complicit with the ruling powers, and the chief priests of the Temple, the very institutional life into which he was born. The revelation here is that Jesus is born to serve the truth... not the institution. The truth is the thing, and if our institutions stray from or subvert the truth, then not unlike our brother Jesus, we are to speak and act for the truth.

By now, surely you have recognized that things in our post-modern world are no different from Jesus's world of the first century. We still organize our common life around institutions of necessity: Church, education, healthcare, government. It is our nature. In some ways we, as a society, have been taught that our institutions are infallible. Yet over the centuries, for example, one such institution, the church, has committed atrocities against human dignity, has foisted pathological theology on its members, has exercised control through fear and guilt; and now the church is grappling with its very relevancy.... That's a good thing. We have been taught, throughout the history of our nation, that our Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the balance of power in our three branches of government, are sacred, worthy almost of worship... And we have seen, and see, that they fail. Why are we surprised? It has forever been thus. Our

institutions will fail us. They are necessary, ironically enough, but they fail. So where is our hope in these apocalyptic days of the twenty first Century?

“Would that all God’s people were prophets,” Moses laments to his right hand man, Joshua, in the Sinai desert in their darkest hour. Would that all of God’s people serve first the truth. There are those in our culture that claim that the truth is a matter of opinion, but I say the truth is the truth, and we humans through our God given gift of wisdom, the gift of the imagination... we know the truth when we see it. And it is a sad reality that many are terrified of the truth, and would take great measures to avoid it; take great measures to suppress it. After all, Luke reminds us that to serve the truth comes at a great cost. It requires humility, honesty, and rigor. The truth Luke says will cause the rise and fall of many... that is to say that we rise with the truth, and we fall in our rejection of it. When we serve the truth we enter the very fullness of life... its joys and its sorrows... its rewards and its risks.... Its ecstasy and its suffering. As followers of Jesus, good people, we have no other choice than to serve the truth: Truth to poverty, truth to racism, truth to injustice, truth to power. We have no other viable option.

And we don’t do this alone. We do it in community. And we are encouraged, inspired, emboldened by the prophets of our own day: Martin Luther King, Jr. who spoke and gave his life against the abuse of an entire population in our country, deprived of their dignity and well-being. Brian Stevenson who has given his life to advocate for those incarcerated on death row... granting them dignity and worth as

children of God even in the face of their violent crimes. Cesar Chavez, who spoke to the wage injustices and abuse of Chicano migrant workers. And there are less heralded prophets: the good people of Dwell Mobile who serve the migrant population of Mobile, finding them shelter and food, and employment and legal aid, and giving them voice in a new culture... now stripped of their funding by the draconian and abusive measures of the Trump administration. And there's Mariann Budde, bishop in our own beloved Episcopal Church, calling on president Trump and his administration to exercise compassion and mercy with regard to the marginalized among us... and calling out the Republican Party's modus operandi of contempt. And there are prophets in this room, and in this city. I've seen you; I've heard you. It is prophecy that will stand against and undermine the evil intentions of Empire.

The truth belongs in the public square, brothers and sisters, which means our faith is a public faith. The prophets come before us didn't hide in the cloister. They didn't hide in the sacristy. They spoke in the public square. As the church we no longer have permission to tend only to ourselves, our happiness, our comfort, our self-awareness. Alas, there are still bishops in the church (including our own), and priests who have chosen silence in the face of evil and injustice; and silence is complicity. Silence is everywhere these days. Their silence, I'm afraid, is meant to protect the plate and pledge of the institution, at the expense of the Truth. But we press on, good people.... We press on.

Courage is the engine of prophecy, and courage is a choice. The root word for courage is "heart." ...Prophets, people of heart, are few in our world, but they are powerful, because they have made the costly choice to bear the Truth. Take heart, good people of the way. We are given for the good of the world, and truth is our guiding light, and truth, our strength. Institutions will rise and fall, but the Truth will stand forever... and, know this... it is invincible.