

## RECOGNIZING JESUS

### Presentation of the Lord, 2014

#### Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24:7-10; Luke 2:22-40

I must confess that my interest in stepping briefly out of the rhythm of our Sunday lectionary and indulging in the feast day allowed by the coincidence of February 2, the Feast of the Presentation and the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, has to do with how intriguing I find the types of Anna and Simeon in Luke's Gospel. First of all, their appearance is unique in the New Testament: no one who is named, other than John the Baptist in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke clearly sees Jesus as the Christ, at least not this early in his life. Matthew as the narrator of the first gospel has no trouble, of course, with 20/20 hindsight and a Hebrew Bible full of prophecy for Jesus to fulfill; but Luke, with absolutely no allusion to the Hebrew Bible, presents us with two seers who, in their own place and time, recognize the baby Jesus as holy. Simeon identifies Jesus as "the light to lighten the Gentiles," that is, the means through which God's will is fulfilled through the people of Israel that all people, not just the Hebrew people, will come to know the God of Israel as *their* God too. And so, in a good post-modern 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century reading of the Bible, I ask how are we like Anna and Simeon? How do we see Jesus? Who is Jesus for us? Where are we in this account, unique in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke? Can we be Anna and Simeon?

In asking this question, I cannot help noticing who Anna and Simeon were in their own time. According to Luke, Simeon was righteous and devout, one who was, as Luke puts it, "looking forward to the consolation of Israel." Interestingly, Simeon, according to Luke, was an ordinary Joe. He may have been a bit more devout than most, but he had a life beyond the temple in Jerusalem. Luke tells us that it was *the Spirit* (or the Holy Spirit) that guided him into the temple on the day of Jesus' circumcision. Unlike Anna, he was not, as we say in our time, "a religious," the term that describes monks and nuns in the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, the term most appropriate for Anna who, Luke tells us, was not only "righteous and devout" (as was Simeon), but "never left the temple, and worshipped there day and night, observing fasting and prayer." Anna, we read, identifies Jesus as integral to the "redemption of Jerusalem." In other words, she, like Simeon, recognizes Jesus as a gift from God, given for salvation. She does not, however, seem to look beyond her own community; Simeon does, recognizing Jesus as a means for the whole of humanity to come to know the One God, the One who Jesus himself will reveal in his ministry as Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit.

Being "righteous and devout" may mean for us in our time, "making a place for God our world." Our Second Reading this morning, even though it is present only because this is also the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany and I didn't want us to lose our place in the continuous reading of 1 Corinthians, this Second Reading suggests a point of departure that is quite authentic to our time and would prevent us from becoming an Anna or a Simeon. It is *wisdom*, Saint Paul cites, which can be translated as *humanism* in our time and place, that would prevent us from entering Luke's account of Jesus' presentation at the temple in Jerusalem. We could easily let go of this opportunity to learn from Luke's account because all the messages of our culture are that God is *not present* in our time and place; that there is nothing beyond mere existence; that there is no meaning to life beyond the present. In the best of circumstances, the claims of humanism may temper our faith or improve our proclamation; but the truth is we all struggle with faith and unfaith, with belief and unbelief (as the New Testament puts it), and we are as vulnerable as the besieged faithful in Corinth, two thousand years ago. And so, to become Anna and Simeon, we must remain in community, we must read and study the proclamation of Holy Scripture, we must approximate the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century equivalent of 1<sup>st</sup> Century righteousness and devotion. Against culture, against the lure of individualism and self-fulfillment, against our comfort and affluence, we are called to a deeper place where faith and hope can take root and grow and flourish. We are called to consider the truth that we are *not alone*, that this is God's world; that we are the children of God; and that Jesus was given precisely for this moment to counter our doubt and the cynicism that stands at our church door begging entry; that Jesus and his gospel were given to nurture the Spirit that lives within and among those who have been called by faith.

And so we see Jesus, perhaps not as Anna and Simeon saw him as the Messiah who would exalt the people of Israel as God's first nation, but rather as God's good news for our broken and sinful world; as the One who looks at a 75 cent raise in the minimum wage in Ontario as a political decision, rather than as a solution to the misery and suffering of this province's working poor; as One who questions the fundamentalist reading of Christian and Hebrew Scripture that gives Israel a free pass in expanding Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, in violation of the Oslo Accords; as the One who challenges our ongoing separation from Canada's First Nations as wholly other, rather than as part of our Canadian family that needs special attention and care; as the One who listens to those who laid their lives on the line during the Second World War and the more recent war in Afghanistan and cries for just restitution and ongoing treatment and rehabilitation for veterans; as the One who names denying health care to refugees as inhumane? as the One who looks at the 4,000 who are without homes in Waterloo Region, one of the most affluent parts of Canada, and asks why we allow this obscenity when our tax dollars are given, among other things, to protect those who are most vulnerable in our society?

Do we acknowledge this Jesus in our world? in the midst of ordinary day-to-day events? Can we recognize Jesus in the swim of all the messages of information, misinformation, and disinformation we receive each day? Can we, like Simeon, *feel the Spirit calling us* to a better way, a way in which all people are treated as the children of God? Can we, like Anna, identify Jesus as the redemption of our city, our society?

Saint Paul, in addressing his Corinthian congregation, hits the nail on the head. He speaks of the many truths and the many ways that are available for subscription. And he notes that, by comparison, God's way, the way of vulnerability and sacrificial love, seems foolish; that to the world as we know it, the possibility of the crucifixion and resurrection motif embodied by Jesus' death and resurrection is beyond unlikely. But unlikely only to those without faith; only for those who cannot recognize Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life; only for those who cannot see the gospel of Jesus Christ as the living Word of God given for our salvation and for the salvation of the whole world.

Dear friends, we fiddle while Rome burns if we turn our backs on the truth of the gospel. We become Christian agnostics if we fail to live by the living Word we have received in the life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We cannot be Anna or Simeon if we turn a cold shoulder, a deaf ear, and a blind eye to the theology of Incarnation that makes of us the Body of Christ given for the deep needs of the world. As Jesus' disciples, as those with the capacity to be Annas and Simeons, we must recognize Jesus as the full and final proclamation of God for our world, for our time and place; as God's definitive gift, given for the deep needs of our world. "I am the vine, and you are branches," Jesus said to his disciples. "Abide in me, and bear much fruit."

This past week, I attended the annual appreciation dinner for the on-call chaplains of Grand River Hospital. I do chaplaincy work in the wider community because it keeps me grounded as a disciple of the Lord Jesus. It's easy to be a Christian on Sunday at church; it's not as easy on the other six days of the week beyond the community of faith. In the work at Grand River Hospital, I enter society as it is – unwashed, unregulated, and typically un-faithed. People are people, I discover in this crisis work at the hospital: it doesn't matter how privileged or how poor you are; it doesn't matter how white or black you are, how young or how old you are, how faithful or how atheist you are: we are all sisters and brothers, called by our common humanity. And sometimes humanity is the only religion I can proclaim in this multi-cultural, multi-faith, and no-faith environment: but it's good enough, because I know that God is the Author and Giver of all life, and that just because I cannot speak the faith or unfaith language of the individuals and families to whom I'm called, it doesn't mean that I can't love sacrificially or be present with and for them in their hour of need. I can be Christ for them, even and especially when they don't have a clue who Christ was or is.

The dinner was catered by Ray of Hope Ministries, specifically its Morning Glory Café. Ray of Hope's mission is to rehabilitate young people who have a criminal record or who have developed a dependency on drugs; but they also have an impressive street ministry in East Kitchener in what is called the Community Centre. Each year, the Spiritual Care Department of Grand River Hospital chooses Ray of Hope to cater this meal, not because of the cuisine or the ambience of the dining room – this year we ate

in the sales training centre at Heffner Toyota in Kitchener – an improvised space. No, the Spiritual Care Department of Grand River Hospital chooses Ray of Hope and the Morning Glory Café because we recognize Jesus as common to our ministry. In those who are in such distress at Grand River Hospital, in those who are in such distress at Ray of Hope, we see the presence of the Risen Christ in, with, and under the saving work both groups do. But Christ is also within and among those who enter these communities needing care and support. We are called to one another by Christ.

The next day, I came back to the church and was reminded that two from our congregation have volunteered at Ray of Hope, and needed a letter of recommendation from their pastor. And then, Scott Brush, who has the communications and resources position for Ray of Hope, by coincidence had sent me an email asking me to support him on his Coldest Night fund raiser which will provide much-needed financial support for Ray of Hope. I recognized Jesus in the coincidence of all these things.

But what an eloquent and profound message we receive when we see organizations such as Ray of Hope and Out of the Cold, and Supportive Housing of Waterloo, and the House of Friendship, and the YWCA/Mary's Place and Project Ploughshares, and Canadian Lutheran World Relief, and the Primate's World Development and Relief Fund, and the Mennonite Central Committee, and the Alliance Against Poverty countering, as Saint Paul would say, the "wisdom of the wise" with the "foolishness of the cross". All of these organizations began because of their love of Jesus and his gospel; all of these organizations continue their saving work because of Jesus and the gospel.

In a world that is so ripe for salvation, in a world that is so in need of gospel love and gospel justice, we are called to recognize Jesus more and more. We are called to be Anna and Simeon, living in hope, watching faithfully for God's goodness and presence in our world and in our experience. And we are called not only as seers, but also as disciples, those who are so animated by the living Word of God, that in some of what we do and are, some of our love and care and advocacy and service, Jesus, by God's grace, might be recognized and his gospel received.