

# ST BART'S



**A Sermon by:**

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## Why We Are Here

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, February 2, 2014  
The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord: Based on Luke 2:22-40*

Though this may seem utterly apparent to others, I don't often admit it: When it is all said and done, I really am a church rat. I love being here. I love the smells of church—especially the day after one of the rare times we use incense. I love the odd, arcane names we call things—why call the handkerchief we wipe the chalice with a handkerchief when you can call it a "purificator," or the box that holds the bread the bread box when much more impressively it can be called the "ciborium," or the lobby the lobby when we can use "narthex"? And, of course, I love the music—the rip-roaring big pieces and especially the ageless, ethereal melodies that transport us to places we didn't know we could go. I realize that big old places like this one, certainly according to people who track such things, are on the decline; but I say: Give us time; we are on the way back!

This story of the Presentation of Jesus, then, not surprisingly, is one of my favorites. It is the ultimate "church" story. The Holy Family came with their newborn, just 40 days old, as was required by the law, to offer him to God as their firstborn son. Forty-day-old babies are pretty cute, just tracking with their eyes and smiling a bit—and Jesus was probably advanced and the cutest of all. It was the law that first sons were offered to God, though there was a way around actually giving them to God. This was the sacrificial system, after all. There was a five-shekel fee, but Jesus' family was too poor to pay it. The Temple being the Temple, though, there was another way. They were allowed the option for the poor as their sacrifice: a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Though the Holy Family in the story are faithful and true and no doubt great looking, the story of the Presentation has always seemed to me to belong to the other named characters, Simeon and Anna. Beyond a doubt, they were church rats, the Temple, day after day, year after year, being the center of their lives. All we know of each is found in this packed chapter of Luke, the primary canonical source of narrative about Jesus' infancy.

Simeon was a righteous and devout man who gave his life to praying for the consolation of Israel. Had some tragedy in his life resulted in his being what we might call a religious fanatic? What made him as he was? We can't say, of course, but we know that he prayed fervently for the coming of the Messiah, Israel's ultimate salvation, its final consolation. In his devotion, Simeon heard the Holy Spirit promise him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah; and at long last the waiting had come to an end. The child he held in his arms, he believed, was indeed the Messiah; and at that moment his life was complete.

In some ways Anna was an even more remarkable figure. Not coming and going from the Temple, she never left it, so intent was she upon her life apart. Widowed at a very young age after only seven years of marriage, she gave all her life to the Temple. From the tribe of Asher, one of the 12 tribes, Anna, for reasons about which we can only speculate, chose not to remarry but to repair to the temple, where she would spend the rest of her life fasting and praying. A prophetess herself, when she heard the words of Simeon, she too knew the truth and began to praise God for the coming of this child. My sense of her is that she reveled in the shadows of the church, demanding almost nothing, always quietly and persistently going about her search for God.

As with much of Luke's narrative, most scholars believe that the abundance and specificity of detail are largely the work of Luke rather than what we would call history. But the essential story is very likely true. What we believe we know about Jesus' family was that they were devout; this was a trek known to observant Jews blessed with a firstborn son. Imagining the

presence of a man like Simeon and a woman like Anna is not much of a stretch for me. Places of worship attract devotion; they attract those who understand themselves as being called apart for prayer, for hope. Literarily, there is much reason for this portion of the story to be told; it helps piece together some ponderings that we have about Jesus' earliest days.

Homiletically, though, the story is more of a challenge. What exactly are we to glean from this story that will make our lives more faithful or more comprehensible? It certainly bears witness to the close marriage of Judaism and Christianity, our religion filled with vestiges of the old re-imagined in the practice of the new. In this instance, though, there is no doubt that Mary and Joseph were simply being good Jews; there was no sense on their part that this event would someday be recorded in masterpieces of religious art. The gospel says, "And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him." Don't you just bet they were?

But what does it really say to us? I admit that I don't believe that every piece of scripture contains a message for us that we can find if we look and pray hard and long enough. It is the arc of scripture that is our treasure, not the piece on every page. This could be one of those, but I don't think so, for in the end Simeon and Anna challenge us in a very significant way. It is not that I think we, certainly not most of us, are being called to "move in" to the church. Even those of us who admit to being unredeemed church rats rarely spend the nights here; and if we ever did, we frankly wouldn't want it to be a large gathering! So it is not that. But it does call us to question what is it that we are truly living for. What are we waiting so devotedly for from God that, upon receiving it, we like Simeon would say, "Lord, let us go now, for we have seen your salvation"? About what might we be so stirred up as to fast and pray, as Anna did, day in and day out for years and years?

What I think we get from Simeon and Anna is the knowledge that these big questions are for us as much as they were for them, and we live them out in one way or another every day of our lives—either consciously or unconsciously. What do we really care about, what do we pray about, indeed to what do we give our lives? Whatever we do, these questions are the critical life questions. My experience tells me that living unconsciously with little or no regard to what truly matters can last a lifetime, but it never brings real life. God did not create us to be inconsequential people; we are created to think and to feel, to analyze and to seek understanding, to live with purpose and intention.

People often come to me, and to people like me, with the question: What is God's will for my life? Most of the time they are in search of an answer about a particular job or relationship, perhaps a vocation in the church. The question is a valid and important one; I have asked it myself on many, many occasions. But the only answer that I ever truly have, though I try to dress it up with some other words, is that God's will for us is to live consciously, purposefully and lovingly. The particulars of it are thorny for sure, but only as relevant as details are. If we have found a way to live consciously, purposefully and lovingly, we are, ***I believe***, living God's will for our lives, regardless of the particulars.

The message from Anna and Simeon is to be awake and to pray for and care about what matters. For them, to do so meant essentially giving their lives to the Temple. For most of us, that is not what it means. It means getting up every day, going to work as consciously as we can, seeking to do what we do purposefully and for good, and to do whatever we do with as much loving kindness as we can. It is this for which we are here, this for which we live our lives.

In the name of God: *Amen*.