

**THE SON OF GOD CAME TO BRING FREEDOM AND ILLUMINATION
– AND OPPOSITION –**

The Presentation of the Lord
February 2, 2025

Today's gospel reveals our salvation, coming not in might and power, but in the guise of a vulnerable innocent fragile child; a child who would grow up to show us the way to freedom and illumination, but also opposition and hardship.

The story begins with Mary's purification in the Temple. This brand-new mother came in obedience to the Law of Moses. The Book of Leviticus says: "If a woman...bears a male child, she shall be unclean [for thirty-three days;]...she shall not touch any holy thing or come into the sanctuary until the days of her purification are completed... When the days of her purification are completed...she shall bring to the priest...a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a turtledove for a purification offering." It was on this thirty-third day since giving birth, that Mary and Joseph and their baby went to the Temple in Jerusalem for Mary's purification.

As she and Joseph and baby Jesus made their way to the Temple that day, they were unaware that an elderly man and woman had been waiting there, at the Temple, for a very long time, waiting in anticipation of the promised Jewish messiah. They were Simeon, a righteous and devout man, and Anna, who, surprisingly for a woman, was a prophet. The Holy Spirit had spoken to both of them, preparing them for God's salvation who was to come.

As Simeon sat next to a tree that day, he prayed and watched and waited. Suddenly, almost imperceptibly, he noticed his senses coming alert. His heart began to pound faster. His mind started to race. He scanned the Temple grounds for its cause. There were many people sitting and standing and walking about. Everything appeared normal, no disturbance, no commotion. But then the familiar inner voice of the Spirit directed his gaze to a peasant couple carrying a little baby who were just coming into view. There must be something special about this family.

Well, in obedience to that inner prompting, Simeon slowly made his way to his feet and moved so that their paths would cross. He saw the little Jewish baby in his mother's arms, looking so common and ordinary. No one else milling about the Temple grounds seemed to take notice of them, to perceive anything unusual in the moment. But Simeon's old wrinkled and weathered face began to beam, as the Spirit revealed to him that there was some mysterious divine glory hidden in the package of the ordinary; in those ten tiny toes and fingers and little face.

Without even thinking how improper it was for him to step towards this unclean woman, he automatically moved to grab the child from her arms. Mary looked shocked and worried as this stranger reached for her baby. But then she saw the joy and glory on Simeon's face, and relaxed, and released the grip on her little boy.

Simeon raised the child high and prayed: "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for

revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Simeon had seen, gloriously displayed in his mind’s eye; that this little baby was God’s intended salvation; God’s freedom and liberation for all Israel and for all of humanity. A freedom that would open the eyes of many people, bringing them further insight and wisdom and illumination. But this freedom offered, would also be greatly opposed by many.

You and I, as Gentiles, we will never be able to fully grasp the significance of the prayer Simeon prayed that day, guided as it was by the Holy Spirit. We will never grasp the depths of its meaning, and how radical and earth shattering it would have been for people at that time to hear. Simeon was standing there in the shadow of Jerusalem’s holy Temple, the Temple of God’s holy presence; the Temple symbolizing the power and uniqueness of God’s chosen people the Jews. And it was in that very place that Simeon chose to blasphemously proclaim that Jesus was God’s salvation and freedom and light to ALL people, including all Gentiles.

As we sit here today, on this February 2nd, it is the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. It is on this day that we celebrate God’s gift of salvation and freedom, and light offered to us. Today, forty days since Christmas, is also the ancient festival of Candlemass. It is a day that has been celebrated as a Christian Feast in churches since about 350AD, beginning in Jerusalem.

Centuries ago on Candlemas Day, candles were taken to church to be blessed before illuminating the darkness of people’s homes. However, in our twenty-first century, all we have to do to bring light is to flick a switch,

or sensors detect sunset and automatically turn on streetlights. Today, nights' darkness is not nearly as dark as it used to be, back when the world had to rely on candles to bring some semblance of light to night's darkness. As each blessed candle was placed in a dark room and lit, it would be a constant reminder of the blessing of Jesus, the light of the world. But it was also meant to be a reminder that we, who have the light of Christ dwelling within us, are called as well to bring salvation and freedom and illumination to our world.

Let's return to that ancient scene on the Temple grounds where Simeon, after praying a prayer to God that was filled with hope and joy, reluctantly handed Jesus back to his mother. But as this devout man continued to look deeply into the eyes of this holy family, he sensed a darkness and dread creeping into his soul. The Spirit of God seemed to be revealing to him the future – what the inevitable consequence would be, of Jesus bringing salvation and light to humanity.

A prophecy rose up in his mind. He spoke it forth to Mary: "This child is destined for the falling and the 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." Immediately, Mary's eyes, so full of joy, began to cloud with tears, her countenance sinking.

The full impact of the incarnate Word of God residing in this fragile child exploded like a timebomb in all of them: Mary and Joseph, Anna, and Simeon. Divinity inhabiting humanity in Jesus, would indeed bring great

illumination to the world, and hope and joy and celebration. But it would also be something greatly opposed by many.

In that society, there were many who had been rejected and impoverished in Israel, who would one day be raised up, while many in position of high honor would be brought low. The social structure would indeed be flipped on its head. This would cause many to violently oppose Jesus' message and ministry. Jesus words would also strip away the façade and masks that many people were wearing, revealing their inner thoughts and intentions and motivations. They would not be pleased with having their shadow selves so vividly on display. Simeon also foretold that a sword would even pierce Mary's soul; bringing her doubt and suffering and grief.

Simeon had prayed: "my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." They were words of great hope and joy and celebration. But Jesus message came at a significant cost to all. He himself had one day said: "Do you think I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I have come to divide people against each other! From now on families will be split apart, three in favor of me, and two against—or two in favor and three against."

Well, what was true of that world two thousand years ago, is still true today. The message brought by Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, still brings salvation and freedom and illumination and transformation to those whose eyes can see. But there are also many who still oppose and reject his

message; a message that disrupts people's lives and agendas and the structure of society.

Oh God, as Simeon of old foretold the work of Jesus, the Christ. May I, may each of us here today, be open to receiving the fullness of salvation and freedom and illumination and transformation he came to bring us. But may we also take the bitter with the sweet; may we be open to the cost this transformation may bring. Amen.