

**Sermon for the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ,
February 2, 2018**

Blessing of Candles, Procession & Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Malachi 3:1–4; Psalm 84:1–6; Hebrews 2:14–18; Luke 2:22–40

Simeon is described as a man who lived in Jerusalem who was waiting for the consolation of Israel—that’s all we know about him, except for one thing, “Inspired by the Spirit he came into the temple”—and at the point in time when God wanted him there.¹

There were at four woman who were prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures,² but Anna is the only woman named as a prophet in the New Testament.³ She lived in the temple. Luke tells us that her response to seeing the child was to give thanks to God and to tell those who were “looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” about the child.⁴

These aren’t the only encounters Luke describes where God uses people to help others know his Son. In his second book, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke relates

¹ Luke 2:27.

² Miriam (Exodus 15:20); Deborah (Judges 4:4); Huldah (2 Kings 22:14); and possibly the unnamed prophet who was the mother of Ma’her-shal’al-hash-baz (Isaiah 8:3).

³ Luke 2:36.

⁴ Luke 2:38.

how Ananias is sent to Saul who was blinded on the road to Damascus,⁵ and he tells how God arranged for Peter and Cornelius the centurion to meet⁶—and how the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the Good News.

Unlike Moses, who was able to see but not enter the land of promise,⁷ Simeon and Anna see salvation and redemption. It's not a land of promise; the child Jesus is salvation.

Earlier this week when I pulled out François Bovon's commentary on Luke, I discovered that I made notes of all his ideas that I wanted to work into last year's sermon. I usually don't do that. So, tonight I'm sticking to what I don't think I've said before.

One thing I didn't mention last year was Bovon's suggestion that the words referring to Joseph and Mary as Jesus' father and mother are perhaps a trace of an earlier oral tradition about the child that didn't know about the virgin birth.⁸ That is not a problem for me.

⁵ Acts 9:10–18.

⁶ Acts 10:17–29.

⁷ Deuteronomy 3:25–27; 34:1–4.

⁸ François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1–9:50*, trans. Christine Thomas, Hermeneia, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 104.

How God was active and is active in human history is a very large subject, but it's not one that troubles my soul or my mind very much. My non-logical mind can wait for many details and issues to resolve themselves in the life of the world to come—with the one terrible issue of real evil.

The prophetess Anna is inspired by God to tell those who were looking to be free—“redeemed”—about the child.⁹ If we set aside the role of the angels speaking to the shepherds, I think it's correct to say that the prophet Anna was the first evangelist of the Good News. In Luke, God's resurrection power doesn't wait for the resurrection. From the beginning of his gospel and through the Acts of the Apostles, Luke is inviting us to see our lives unfolding in God's plan for humankind.

Jesus taught the parable of the tax collector who was so conscious of his sins that he could not raise his head, but looking at the ground, could only ask for God's mercy. Jesus proclaimed, [quote] “I tell you, this man went down to his house accepted by God”—

⁹ Luke 2:38.

“right with God.”¹⁰ To all in the house of another tax collector, Zacchaeus, Jesus proclaimed, “Today salvation has come to this house.”¹¹

In Luke, the wrongdoer hanging on the cross next to Jesus does not need to wait for Jesus to die and rise before knowing that he will be with Jesus in paradise that very day.

I want to remind myself and you of where Luke the evangelist is taking us in telling us these stories: to the moment of conversion in our own lives, the moment in which we become aware in what one might call a convincing moment that God had really and truly acted in our lives. There might be someone in this room for whom tonight will come that moment of conversion. It’s always in God’s hands.

This child whose birth we celebrate is the Holy One of God. He is faithful to his Father’s will for his suffering and death, not because the child—the man—has no

¹⁰ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version, Expanded Edition*, ed. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), Matthew 18:12 n., 1272.

¹¹ Luke 19:9.

power, but because of who he is. His love and his life are greater than death.

I close with the first words of a favorite hymn, written about the Eucharist, but really a petition for our minds and souls all the days of our lives, “O God unseen, yet ever near, thy presence may we feel.”¹²

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹² Edward Osler, “O God, unseen yet ever near,” *The Hymnal 1982 according to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), no. 332.