

Homily for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord

February 1-2, 2020

Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

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“They were called ‘Thunder Candles,’” the elderly Polish nun told me. “We would light them during a thunderstorm to pray for protection. These candles were blessed on February 2nd, the Feast of the Purification of Mary, the same time as the candles for women’s churching rite.”

Hardly anyone remembers the old rite of the churching of women after childbirth. Until the mid-20th century a mother who had just given birth was customarily forbidden to enter the church building until she had been “churched.” She was to kneel at the church steps with a candle in her hand; the priest would come out, sprinkle holy water on her, and recite Psalm 24, “Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts...” Then the priest would extend the left side of his stole for the woman to hold as he led her, as if on a leash, into the church, where she was to pray and go to confession. While the churching ritual was explained to women as a blessing rite, its deep roots come from Leviticus and the ritual impurity incurred by a woman with a flow of blood.

With the revision of the liturgical calendar in 1969, the Feast of the Purification of Mary was changed to the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, that is, to mark the presentation of Jesus as a first-born son, in the temple. The rite of purifying new mothers had fallen into disuse by 1960 because women, aware that their childbearing was seen as somehow sinful, increasingly refused to take part. It was not among the revised rites in the liturgical reform after Vatican II.

This was the setting used by Luke—the time of “their” purification—to place the child Jesus and his parents in the temple. As always, the Gospel writer has a reason for choosing and shaping the stories recorded for the generations who came after the historical Jesus. This story presents a model of how the coming of Jesus fit into the context of his Jewish people and their customs. The primary purpose of the Gospel writers was to demonstrate that this Jesus of Nazareth, crucified as a criminal but inexplicably experienced as alive to a large number of

his followers, was in fact the Messiah, the Anointed One, promised to his people as a deliverer.

Here the identity of Jesus was clarified by setting up a contrast between young and old: generations succeeding generations. The “Nunc dimittis,” the text put in the mouth of Simeon in this passage, gives witness to a powerful sense of fulfillment of the promises of God for deliverance for God’s people. And the prophet Anna recognized him as well to be the embodiment of God’s promises; she proclaimed this knowledge to anyone who would hear. Both Anna and Simeon, an old woman and an old man, facing their own mortality, served as messengers, “angelos” in Greek, of the new dawn breaking upon their people.

Our reading from Malachi sharpens the theme of the messenger by coupling it with a radical call to root out social injustice. Clearly, God is not going to save us without our cooperation. And here is where we come in.

In Malachi, the long-promised messenger who prepares the way for God will launch a full-scale purification process, starting with the “descendants of Levi” so they can present their offerings in righteousness (an interesting take on the need for the purification of the priesthood with echoes in the Catholic Church today!). Beyond our reading in today’s liturgy, Malachi goes on to identify specific evildoers in his own time: the messenger will bear witness “...against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow, the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me...” Whew. It is as if the list of evils had been ripped from today’s headlines.

The call to be a messenger, that is, our call in Baptism to bear witness to the God among us, lies in our willingness to stand up to injustice. And this is how we bring light to the world—not with mere candles, but as those called by God to stand up to the distant rumbling thunder, and to bring a blessing out of the storm.