



SERMONS THAT WORK

The Presentation

Joy and Sorrow

[RCL]: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84 or Psalm 24:7-10; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

If you have ever lived in (or simply loved) a very large city, you will likely have discovered that for the urban dweller, one of life's greatest pleasures is walking down busy sidewalks on a mild evening as life swirls around you in patterns of infinite possibility. Signs blink and cars honk and dishes clatter on restaurant patios. Every person who passes by offers a fleeting opportunity for a life-changing encounter—a glance, a word, an accidental entanglement that might mean nothing or everything. And while most of those encounters will never materialize, their promise makes the air thick with hope and intrigue, like the stillness before a summer thunderstorm. There is mystery and there is revelation in those city streets for the one who is willing to walk them.

And so it is for the Holy Family in today's Gospel passage, moving through the crowds of Jerusalem with an infant in tow, headed to the Temple to fulfill a ritual obligation. Dust and splattered mud. The smell of market stalls and incense. Livestock and oven smoke. Voices laughing, arguing, negotiating the price of wheat. A city, in all its vulgarity and glory and capacity for surprise.

Then, as they enter the temple, a man steps into their path. A stranger, yes, but there must have been something about him—an air of trustworthiness and devotion—because Mary places her precious child into his arms while Joseph stands there, quizzically holding the turtledoves as the unheeding crowds in the temple courtyard rush past. The old man is rapturous at first, praising God, saying something to himself about light and promises and the Gentiles. Mary can tell from his expression, though: *he knows*. He knows this is not just any child. He knows who her son truly is.

But this is not the end of the encounter.

For then, the aged Simeon looks at the hopeful face of Jesus' mother and utters the words she must hear, the words that she never wanted to hear:

"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."

This is what might happen when we meet a stranger on a city street; they might reveal the truth to us, including the truth we didn't want to know. The truth that we must carry with us to Golgotha.

Thus, we are left with a bit of a conundrum in our celebration of the Feast of the Presentation. Is it a joyful occasion? A somber one? Can we ever fully delineate between those two experiences in this Christian journey?

There is much gladness, to be sure, in both Simeon and Anna's meeting with the Christ Child. Both of them recognize that, in this moment, what Malachi promises has come to pass: "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." And thus, God has fulfilled God's promise to Israel; the King of Glory has come in (Psalm 24:7) and redemption is at hand.

But there is also pain, or a promise of pain: those haunting words, "a sword will pierce your own soul too." The child destined for glory is also destined for suffering, and whether Mary intuited it already or not, now there is no escaping the fact: her baby will one day come back to Jerusalem for another purpose, and there will be no happy ending here. The temple priests who bless her son today will one day seek to crucify him, and there is no turning back from this.

The pain and the gladness are interwoven so very tightly, forming a pattern that is not yet discernable. There is only this moment, this encounter of blessing and dread, as the city goes about its business.

Ancient though this encounter might be, the scene could still seem familiar to us, rushing as we do through the crowded marketplace of 21st-century life. Whether we live in a city or not, we know what it is like to go about our business, focusing on the task at hand, distracted by a toothache or a heartbreak or rumors of war. And just when we start to get lost in our own narrative, a stranger bumps into us and tells us something we needed to hear. It might be a kind word; it might be a sobering one. But it is something true, something that jolts us back into an understanding that our lives are not simply our own private drama to be enacted according to our preferences. We are part of a larger story, one that contains all manner of joy and sorrow, and the world will draw us into that story whether we like it or not. A sword will pierce our own souls, too, and sometimes we must be reminded of that, lest our hearts become deadened to the full scope of God's vision.

As followers of Jesus, in fact, we must pursue these hard and surprising encounters—we must follow the Christ Child into the temple, as it were, and see who we might encounter there to tell us about ourselves. We do this in any number of ways—by coming to church each week, by going out into the community to serve others, by taking a stand on issues of justice.

In all these activities and many more, we are placing ourselves in a vulnerable position that risks the likelihood of colliding with wise and terrifying strangers. We must be mindful about doing this, especially now, because in an era of social media echo chambers and increasing isolation, to do so is decidedly countercultural.

But we know that if we don't, the Simeons and the Annas of the world will never find us. We will never rejoice with them; we will never see what they see; we will never understand ourselves through the reflection of their piercing gaze.

And so, on this day, on a feast that contains both joy and sorrow, in a temple that contains both blessing and burden, we learn this: in the city, as in all of life, there is much to be found. Some of it is wondrous, and some of it is disturbing. There are strangers around every corner, and every so often, one of them will stop us in our tracks and change our story forever.

There is danger here, and banality, and distraction, and, yes, goodness. God can be found in all of it, though, and the fundamental lesson is that we must present ourselves in its midst, in the cacophony, in the muddy streets, in the jostling sea of searching souls—we must make our way to the temple and allow our fragile hearts to be pierced, because somehow that is the only way we can live. Somehow, it is the only way we can be saved.

The Rev. Phil Hooper was ordained to the priesthood in 2019 and currently serves as Curate at Trinity Episcopal Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana. A native of the west coast and a graduate of Church Divinity School of the Pacific (M.Div., 2019), he is passionate about spiritual formation, contemplative prayer, and the ways that these things impact our discipleship. Outside of church, you will likely find him in a local bookshop or on a road trip exploring the Midwest. His sermons and other writings are available at www.byanotherroad.com.