

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Fourth Sunday After The Epiphany
31 January 2016

Scripture readings:

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Luke 4:21-30

Well, the Bible gets crazier and crazier all the time, doesn't it? *[laughter]* *"In the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus read from the book of the prophet Isaiah. All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth...Then they took him to the brink of the hill on which their city was built and wanted to push him over it."* Really? And why was that?

Well, it's hard to figure out, and I'm not sure I have it right but let's try this for a stab at it. He tells these two stories about many widows in Israel at the time of Elijah when God was really angry. The heavens were shut up for three years and six months. There was a severe famine and yet Elijah was sent to none of the widows except the widow in Zarephath in Sidon. Now I don't know anything about those places, but I know Zarephath and Sidon weren't where *they* were. They were foreigners. The second story: *"There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."* Another foreigner!

Now when religious people are pretty sure that they're making God happy by their religious behavior and they're given proof that God has shown her mercy elsewhere rather than on the people who were working so hard to make God happy, they get angry. And the person who tells them that gets pushed off the cliff. Religion 101! *[laughter]*

I suppose we do it all the time. It's hard for us to believe, particularly those of us who are engaged in the religious enterprise - it's hard for us to believe that God can love somebody as much as we hope God loves us because of what we do, thereby missing the entire message of the gospel, and Jesus knows this when he takes his message of God's love for all people to the people who live in his hometown. I imagine Jesus' hometown wasn't much different from my hometown. Allentown when I grew up was 110,000 blue-collar white people. I've just finished reading a sociological history of what happened to Allentown since the days that I left. It's fascinating to see how governmental organizations understand what happened in sociological change when different people moved in. I've shared with you my frustration about how the Church managed that change, how the Puerto Rican pastor in the congregation where I grew up never once offered a service in Spanish and closed the place. But her Hispanic sexton who cleaned the church who was also a Pentecostal pastor has gathered a congregation in that building. Thanks be to God!

Do you get it? The gospel is this - I could get arrested for this, I suppose, by the church police - the gospel is this: there is absolutely nothing you can do to make God happier with you than she is already. No smiles? Isn't that a relief? You cannot make God happy. God *is* happy, and out of God's joy you are created. That's all there is to it. And if you believe that about yourself and everybody else in the world it puts enormous holes in most standard religious enterprises. How are you going to tell who is a member and who isn't? What do you mean - she, you think, is as much loved by God as I am? How could he possibly...do you know about his life? Do you know about your own? That's the problem. Everybody does have a finger to point, and I think we were given fingers to point but only at the person to whom they're connected! *[laughter]*

I can't figure out what the intelligence is about electing these lessons for today, but there's only one more week left in the Epiphany cycle and then Lent begins. We're within a couple weeks of Ash Wednesday. Can you get that? In February. There is something that happens this week that informs our time and our journey through the Church Calendar. Do you know what Tuesday is? Groundhog's Day!

We were 110,000 blue-collar white people in Allentown who knew what Groundhog's Day was. Groundhog's Day - an observation that comes out of the agrarian life of the Pennsylvania Germans in an attempt to prognosticate when spring will come by virtue of the shadow of field vermin. [laughter] If Punxsutawney Phil sees his shadow will we have six more weeks of winter or not?

But what you need to know about the second of February in the life of the Church is that it's a multi-layered observance and it's worth taking a little time to think about it. On the second of February in the Church is celebrated the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, Candlemas, and Groundhog's Day. I don't think that's accidental. Count the days from Christmas Day and the second of February is how many? Forty! Forty days is an important amount of time in scripture and in Church Calendars. It rained forty days and forty nights. What we're talking about is a significant passage of time from scripture when it was customary for women who were fouled and soiled by the business of giving birth. And you know the pre-Christian and primitive cultures' fear of women and what issued from them and where children came from and all of that soiling experience of giving birth. They weren't allowed to touch things that were holy afterwards and were finally cleansed forty days later by going to the Temple. There is still in Jewish practice something known as a *mikvah*, a ritual bath forty days after giving birth.

Sometimes in the tradition of the Church and in the art of the Church the business of the circumcision of Jesus and the presentation of Jesus in the Temple are conflated into the same celebration. So paintings and symbolic representations of Mary's purification are coupled with the presentation of Jesus in the Temple and conflated, pushed together with images of his circumcision. There's a question about when the circumcision was. The Church in its calendars until the puritan 1970s commemorated the first of January as the circumcision and the naming of Jesus. What you may not know about the celebration on the first of January according to Church calendars and lectionaries is it was always the shortest gospel of the year, the first day of the year. One verse or two: "*And they took the child and circumcised him and called his name Jesus.*" When we re-wrote the liturgies in the late 1970s we circumcised the shortest gospel of the year and changed it to the Name of Jesus and left out the circumcision. And I don't think that's a mistake. I think it happened on purpose but I think it's a mistake for having done it. It's the first time that infant screams in pain and the first time that infant bleeds. We in this liturgy are going to move to a cup of wine which we will call the blood of Christ, and I think it's a mistake to forget that that blood was shed way long before the cross.

So here is the second of February, forty days after Christmas, reminding us of the Virgin Mary as a human being fulfilling the Law, going to the Temple as a poor woman. Average women were expected to take a lamb to be sacrificed for a burnt offering and a turtle dove for a sin offering. She was poor so she could substitute two birds for the lamb. So she takes turtle doves. Five shekels were probably paid. It's felt that the presentation of an infant and the paying of the five shekels was a substitution for more primitive practices of sacrificing the firstborn male. I have a suspicion that circumcision was also a way of mutilating the child rather than killing him and a way of getting around those ancient and deeply-rooted passions in the universal community of wanting to do harm to a firstborn male to appease an angry god. You see the problem when you have a god who's mad. You start killing your children.

So here we have on the second of February the Purification of Mary in the Temple, the fulfilling of the Law. She herself *is* the temple. She's the container for the savior. She carries God. The Church eventually comes to call her in Greek *theotokos*, the god-bearer, the god container.

The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple in this forty-day period on Tuesday is the ransom of the firstborn from the necessities of infant sacrifice. And then we get these extraordinary stories of the fulfillment of God's promise to Simeon, a faithful man in the Temple - possibly a priest, possibly not - and Anna, an old prophetess, who believed that God would be seen before they died. Certainly Simeon did, and when the baby Jesus is laid in his arms the tradition tells us he sang the *Nunc Dimittis*. He

must have been a good Catholic. *[quiet laughter]* “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your word for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared before the face of...who? Yes, the woman in Sidon and the leper in Syria...before the face of all people, a Light to lighten the geeks, the gooks, the foreigners, the outsiders, the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.” It’s not that Israel is excluded but that Israel is not the only place where God’s love would be known.

That message is pre-Christian. That *Nunc Dimittis* comes out of the mouth of Simeon. Well, if not pre-Christian, certainly very early in the life of Christ. By the way, there are arguments whether or not the second of February is a Marian festival or a Christian festival. So in the first prayer book of King Edward VI - this is for you Anglicans - in 1549 it was the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. By the next prayer book in 1662 it was a Christo-centric feast. It became the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. So even in the liturgical life of the Episcopal Church here in America, the Anglican Church, the English Church, there is that theological shift of emphasis on the day.

One of my problems with deleting the circumcision from the first of January is I think it smacks of anti-Semitism because you know Christians don’t circumcise their babies anymore. Is that right? *[laughter]* It’s not required. I have other suspicions. At the time a kind of very edgy feminism was alive in the life of the Church and the scandal of the particularity of Jesus’ gender may have been an issue. I don’t know. It’s just a guess. But in any case, the second of February is an important date because of all these layers of meaning. And then in the English Church on the second of February there was a celebration of something called Candlemas. Candlemas is kind of fun because it’s the day on which all the candles for use in the life of the Church for the next year are blessed. It’s probably related to old Roman practices. When an emperor came to visit the village an emissary from the village went to the city gate to greet the emperor and then other people led the emperor in with lights and lanterns. There was a procession involved which had to do with meeting the emperor at the gate and inviting the emperor into the city.

In the Eastern Church the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple was called the *Ypapanti*’ which simply translated means “the meeting.” The meeting of whom? The meeting of God Almighty in the person of a baby and the meeting of human beings. God encounters humanity in the person of Jesus. Humanity experiences this hope and expectation of a messiah and encounters God there. And then Jesus leads the way into a dark, dismal and cold world with the light and warmth of the gospel. So we have a meeting between God and man and this showing forth which we’ve celebrated throughout Epiphany of God’s presence with us, Emmanuel in flesh.

One of the other things about the second of February is it’s a sort of hinge date between winter and spring. I went to the opera yesterday to hear a rather ordinary performance of *Turandot*. It’s not the worst I’ve heard. I once heard Liu booed off the stage at the Met and I once heard a woman who shouldn’t have been on the stage. Yesterday wasn’t that bad, but it wasn’t the best I’ve heard. The first opera I ever heard in Philadelphia in some cow palace was Birgit Nilsson singing the role. I didn’t know what I was hearing but it was good. The point is when I came out of the theater I was pleased and delighted to see there was still sunlight - and it was a long opera. The days are, in fact, getting longer. Spring is coming, but it’s not here yet! Hope, come hither, look forward.

And this is the time of year and maybe the second of February is the day when we start thinking about paying taxes on the land we intend to till and fertilize and use to grow things. It may be the day, usually Ascension Day is the day when the bounds are beaten in certain places in England. Now that’s a lot of fun, I think. Parishes had property. We should do it here sometime. We’d really get tired because you know there’s a hundred acres here that belong to us. When you beat the bounds you go out and there are usually young boys in the procession for a reason because they are the memory chip for the future. You walk around the property and say, “*This stone is where the property ends and the neighbor’s begins. That tree, this tree, this hillock...*” and part of the fun is you come to the boundaries and the kids

push each other around so they remember where the territory is that belongs to the parish. And they know when someone's intruding and they know where not to intrude themselves.

The second of February invites us to think toward the rest of the year, toward what it is we will plant and nourish and eventually harvest and to do that in anticipation rather than be caught with our lamps down. Ten wise and foolish virgins with their lamps trimmed and not trimmed. Caught with your lamps down.

The second of February - a turning point. So for the agrarian Pennsylvania Dutch a day to look forward to spring and to hope for what's coming anyway. By the way, the groundhog has a very poor success rate. I think it's thirty-some percent so it's not very accurate. So don't count on field vermin. *[laughter]* I feel pretty much about the groundhog as I do about the Shroud of Turin. *[laughter]* A low blow. I'm sorry.

So we are faced this week with a significant turning point in the life of the Church, in our life together. Now one other interesting thing is that in the Eastern Church Christmas is celebrated on the sixth of January. The second of February is not forty days after the sixth of January, but guess what *is*? It's a twelve day difference. You can figure it out. Yes, it's Valentine's Day! And I have a suspicion that Valentine's Day has become as important as it has - apart from choxes of bocolates and quetbous of roses - is because of that forty-day distance from Epiphany because of the way we organize and manage our time and celebrate it. All of this to say the Epiphany season comes to an end next Sunday. We're going to start to look toward Lent, and it's probably worth our time to think about what's coming on Tuesday, this multi-layered celebration of Jesus as an infant, the role of his mother as the god-bearer, God encountering mankind in that encounter between Simeon and Anna and Jesus and Mary and Joseph, the circumcision of our Lord, a real human being screaming and bleeding from the first days of his life so that we might believe that God - and these are the words we hear every week in the Mass here - "*comes to live and die as one of us,*" a bleeding, screaming, sentient, at times confused, believing presence who says to the Church of his day, "*You've got it all wrong. The only religious reality is, in fact, love.*"

The epistle lesson for today is often read at weddings, and there is a snobby theological opinion that it doesn't belong at weddings. But the point is that text from 1 Corinthians says that all religious behavior amounts to what Luther called "a bag of filthy rags" if it's not connected to a loving human relationship. Your religious behavior, in fact, stinks and is counter-productive to the gospel if it is not related to a loving, significant, respectful relationship with other human beings.

And so it was today in Rome my buddy Frank...It was an overcast day but he brought the sunshine to me, I'll tell you. I missed a lot of what he said as I usually do, but he was talking to a group of people there. I think it was a youth group, maybe from Spain, with Cardinal so-and-so, whoever he was. And the camera from behind the pope looking down into the piazza with all the people there zoomed in on this bunch of people and there in a black overcoat with a little cardinal-red beanie was the Cardinal. When the pope said his name he simply put his hand over his heart. That's half of the story. Before he ended he had a little girl on one side of him in the window and a little boy on the other - the little boy in a hoodie, the little girl with her folded piece of paper. She read and read in beautiful Italian. I don't know what she said but essentially it was "*we love you.*" And I thought, "*He's got it right. The kids are with him in the window. The honcho's in the piazza where he belongs with the rest of them.*" *[laughter]* That's right! That's the way it's supposed to be. That's what Jesus was saying in the gospel today and that's what it's all about!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.