

Rev. Katya Brodbeck - Powell United Methodist Church

“The Joy of Meeting Christ”

Merry Christmas, everyone! Yes, today is still Christmas, in fact, today is the third day of the Christmas season. Christmas consists of twelve days. We all know the song “Twelve days of Christmas.” So what is happening on the third of Christmas in the song? Do you remember? I think “3 French Hens, 2 Turtle Doves, and a Partridge in a Pear Tree” might be involved.

I trust that your Christmas Eve and Christmas day were meaningful despite the difficulties that we all are going through. Some of you probably were able to see your family. Some of you created new traditions and rituals that perhaps include Zoom and Facetime meetings. We will never forget this Christmas, for sure, especially because some of us did not get to see our families and loved ones. And we all are looking forward to that time when we will see them again, look them in the eye and give them the biggest and the tightest hug ever! I imagine the joy overwhelming our hearts and tears flowing. As I am describing this to you, I am imagining the same reaction in the heart of Simeon and Anna as they saw Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. Today’s scripture talks about an encounter of joy, an encounter that was long-expected.

You see we rarely get to hear this story from the 2nd chapter of Luke about these devout people who came to the Temple to see Jesus and to bless him. Let me remind you of the context of this encounter. Everything happens in the Temple. Mary and Joseph came to the Temple to fulfill certain laws that followed having a baby, a firstborn, including presentation of Jesus to the Lord and some purification rituals for Mary. Presentation of Jesus is connected to a long-standing tradition of consecrating a first born child to the Lord. The purification ritual for Mary involved immersing oneself in a mikva or plural mikvaot, in Hebrew. It is a small pool that women could go in and perform the ritual. I actually have seen those when I visited the Holy Land. So this is why Mary and Joseph were in the Temple. Now Simeon and Anna, they were in the Temple as well. What we know about Simeon is that he was a very dedicated person of faith, who served in the Temple, and he was old. Anna was a widow and served God faithfully as well, also was older although, we can't quite say this about a woman.

Being in the Temple, rituals of fulfilling the laws, all paint a picture of something very special and holy happening. Indeed, it was very special. What the text says to us is that God revealed to Simeon that he would not die until he would see the Messiah, the Savior. That encounter that Simeon waited for so long finally came true. He saw the baby and picked him up and said all those words of blessing to Jesus that are now known as “Nunc Dimittis”, from Latin - “now you dismiss...your servant.” It is like Simeon saw what he was living for, he saw the promise of God’s salvation to all people being fulfilled in this little baby and now he is ready to die! Because he has seen what he was waiting for his whole life! It is like “see Paris and die!” Now for Anna, the prophet, it was also quite an occasion to see the Christ child in the Temple! She came up to Mary, Joseph, and Simeon probably still holding the baby, and thanked God for him and then told everyone about Jesus.

The appearance of Anna and Simeon in the Temple in the literary context of Luke's Gospel is very important. Because their presence and their words speak about Jesus are very important to point to the role that Jesus came to play and point to how God would fulfill God's promises through him. Anna and Simeon are like our good old saints of the church. Every church has them. Our church certainly does, a lot of them, some of them we did lose last year. They are devout and faithful, caring so much for the church and its mission. Just like Anna and Simeon, these beloved saints provide wisdom and encouragement to their community and we thank them for it. This encounter in the Temple, the encounter of joy and blessing that Simeon and Anna had experienced meeting the Christ child in the Temple with rituals reminds us of our encounters with God and our own rituals and practices that we can cultivate to experience God.

I was thinking how important it was that Anna and Simeon were connected to the Holy Spirit and led by the Spirit to see baby Jesus. It says in the text that Simeon was a person who lived by the Spirit and that it was, in fact, the Spirit that led him to the Temple that day. Anna, we know what she did - it says in the text, she worshipped night and day, she was fasting and praying. Anna and Simeon had those rituals that connected them to the presence of God and because of that, they were very sensitive to the activity of God in their life and in this world, they were led to see the Christ and the Messiah and to experience this blessing of long-awaited meeting, of a long-expected encounter, especially Simeon. How important it is for us to create our own rituals, practices that create space for us to experience and encounter God.

I have to be honest praying had been very awkward for me since the time I became a believer 13 years ago. I felt anxious and not sure what to say, how to say it, where to sit or stand. Slowly I started to find rituals and ways that I can pray and encounter God that worked for me. For one whole year, I swam. That was my spiritual discipline and a way to connect with God in the water. During the lockdown and the pandemic, this summer I created a ritual of doing some stretch exercise including some yoga moves and then sitting with God on my porch. I love my porch and sitting looking at the trees and the grass and the sky. As it got colder, my ritual of exercise and sitting with God migrated inside. When we put the Christmas tree up and the advent wreath, I found that wearing a comfy robe (Karen, if you are watching this, it is that robe from the Christmas party), drinking vanilla chai and looking at the tree and candle light add so much to my already existing morning ritual, that now actually become a favorite part of my day and I don't want to put away Christmas tree after Christmas because it adds so much for my prayer time.

You see, I had my tree up, my comfortable robe, comfortable socks, vanilla chai tea - all of that created sort of the ambiance, place where this mystery, this encounter can take place. That is why we decorate and create sacred spaces, especially in the church calendar year. During Advent, we were lighting the candles. And I hope you did on your advent wreaths. They bring meaning. We will be moving into Lent in several weeks, and there will other rituals and we will begin Lent with the rituals of imposition of ashes. We need those things. For Mary and Joseph, the dedication of baby Jesus, the purification that Mary had to go through. Those rituals brought meaning for that time. As this new life, a baby came into the lives of Mary

and Joseph, and they welcomed him in, those were meaningful things to do and honor this new change in new life. The coolest part of all of that is that we use ordinary things that we are near and around us to create our rituals. But because of God's presence, these ordinary things become extra ordinary for us. They make a pathway for this encounter to happen. For our longing to meet God and be in God's presence and to go through life with meaning and purpose.

The New Year is coming, it is a tradition to create a new year resolution. Invitation is to have a new year resolution to create a ritual if you don't have one using the ordinary things around us, tea, fireplace, nature, comfy chair. Or perhaps if you have one, modify it so it brings life. So that we are able to have the encounter, to be soaked, if you will, in God's peace and love, so that our lives then are guided and speared head by God and the Holy Spirit. So that we are sensitive to God's activity in our lives and to the nudges of the Holy Spirit.