

You may have been a bit surprised that we sang a Christmas carol at the beginning of this service. It might still be Epiphany, but Christmas is definitely over even for the die-hards who insist on celebrating all 12 days of Christmas. However, the carol we sang, *Angels from the realms of glory*, works very well with our gospel this morning which is about Jesus' parents bringing him to the temple as was customary to do with the first born son. Baby Jesus is recognized by two prophets – Simeon and Anna – as the Messiah – the one who will enlighten the nations and the glory of the people Israel.

Listen again to the words.

*Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.*

Proclaiming the Messiah's birth is exactly what Simeon and Anna do and this may be just what Jesus' parents needed. After all they are first time parents. Jesus is almost six weeks old and unless first time parents back in those days were more evolved than parents of today, they were probably still getting accustomed to all that came with caring for a newborn. They were also probably wondering how it would go with raising this special child – the one whose birth was announced by an angel and was conceived from God not man. This is the baby who shepherds came to worship after hearing from angels that he had been born. I wonder if Mary and Joseph were thinking well – what's next. How special is this child?

When they arrive at the temple to present Jesus and for Mary's purification which was required 40 days after birth, Simeon sees them. He takes the child and then proclaims what has become well known verses of scripture.

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Mary and Joseph are amazed. Simeon blesses Jesus AND Mary. Another prophet Anna comes out and she too recognizes who Jesus is and begins to proclaim that this is the one who will redeem Israel.

How wonderful this is! Jesus has been recognized BUT, we cannot ignore what Simeon also says. *"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."* These are confusing worrisome words. Not something you want to hear about your six week old baby. It is so much easier to focus

on Jesus being the light of the world. We don't hear about Mary and Joseph's reaction to these words, but I wonder if they pondered these words in their hearts.

Proclaiming that the light of the world is coming is a powerful proclamation. It brings us hope. We believe that the darkness can be chased away and life can be better. We long to be lifted up by the light and made whole.

However, this gospel reminds me that the light brings more with it. We are lifted up out of the darkness, but in that process, work must be done. It is not easy when the light starts to shine in dark place and expose some of the wrong in the world that needs to change or the wrong in our lives that we need to address. The coming of the light can pierce our hearts deeply and yet if we can persist, I believe the light of Christ brings us closest to wholeness.

I found myself imagining the parents of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. bringing him to the temple and having a prophet say similar things about him as Anna and Simeon said about Jesus. This child will spearhead a movement which will bring light to great wrongs against a people. Change will happen. Unjust laws will be overcome. Some will be lifted up, some will fall, some will lose their lives and your hearts will be broken.

I could say the same for Nelson Mandela or Mother Teresa or Mahatma Gandhi. Those who bring light to this world do not bring it without work or disturbance or without changing the structures ingrained into our society. And often even as the light leads us to wholeness and healing, our souls are deeply pierced.

When I was at the Rooted in Jesus conference in Atlanta week before last, we heard from the Rev. William Barber, co-chair for the Poor People's Campaign – a non-partisan movement deeply concerned about the economic and political structure that keep so many Americans poor - 43.5% of our people. He showed a video where we saw sorts of people black, white, young and old. They were veterans, coal miners, people working 24/7 and not able to make a living wage, those who were homeless or without health insurance. Rev. Barber is shining a light on a situation that needs to change but he says change will not happen unless we willing to change the very things that will affect our status, our way of living and our money.

What are you thinking now? Talk about inner thoughts being revealed. I know I felt very uncomfortable when I heard these words. Being part of shining Christ's light on the situation of the poor involves falling and rising and most likely some sword piercing of our souls. Interestingly, the present poor people's campaign is a revival of work Martin Luther King Jr. called for before his death.

Today as we celebrate Jesus' presentation in the temple and as we hear the words of Simeon and Anna proclaiming the arrival of the Messiah – the light of the world, remember that Jesus is still bringing light into the world. The question I want you to ponder, how are you being called to be a part of Christ's light in the world and what will

you need to let go of and give up to do that work? How will you proclaim the birth of the Messiah today so that Christ's light can shine on all people?