



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:21-40

This meditation was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, December 28, 2008 at the 11:15 a.m. service.

What are your favorite religious rituals? Or, do you even have any? You may think not since the concept of a ritual is not one that most people find appealing. The word *ritual* suggests to many something that is repetitive, mechanical, thoughtless, even sterile. Ritual seems to speak of the old, the tiresome, the boring, the hackneyed which seems of little importance to most people --- unless of course you happen to be from Charleston, SC, where the old, the tried and the traditional border on the sacred! And yet, for most people in western culture it is the new, the innovative, the avant-garde that excites us and appeals to us and gets our juices flowing. The concept of ritual, on the other hand, leaves most people rather underwhelmed.

And yet, we all have our rituals whether we recognize them or name them as such. We have personal rituals (coffee and newspaper in the morning), family rituals (bedtime stories with children and prayers that bless all known acquaintances), community rituals (driving through the Festival of Lights at the James Island County Park) and national rituals (the lighting of the Christmas Tree at Rockefeller Center). The fraternal organizations and social clubs of which we are apart have there own peculiar rituals as well.

And there are numerous holiday rituals. Just think of the Christmas rituals that characterize your own celebration of the season. There are rituals concerning how you decorate your home, if you will have a tree & where it will be located, when you will open your presents, where you will eat, when you will eat, what you will eat, and who sits where as you eat. Maybe it is a part of your ritual to attend a certain service on Christmas Eve. Maybe you have a family advent wreath or advent calendar that adds to the season. Maybe you watch a certain movie or read a certain story. Our rituals vary and are as distinctive as they are different, but we know instinctively that they matter to us regardless of what others may think, and regardless of whether we call them rituals.

You see, it is not our rituals that are odd or empty but rather the rituals of others. In Italy, I am told, they don't decorate Christmas trees with lights but rather they decorate small wooden pyramids with fruit. In Caracas, Venezuela it is a ritual on Christmas Eve to block off the city streets so that the residents can roller skate to church. In Norway on Christmas Eve all of the brooms in the house are hidden because long ago it was believed that witches and mischievous spirits would come and steal them so that they could ride on them. And in the Ukraine it is a ritual to decorate the Christmas tree with an artificial spider web for good luck, if your tree should not have a real spider web, which is even better luck!

To be sure we have our religious rituals as well. There are certain things we do which either connect us to our religious heritage and faith community or enhance our personal faith journey in some way. We come to worship regularly. It is a part of our ritual to set aside a portion of our income as a tithe or offering. It is a part of our ritual to bring our children to the church for baptism, to enroll them in Sunday School or Vacation Bible School. It's just what we do, you understand. It

helps to make us who we are. It is a part of our religious ritual to say grace over our meals, to read the Bible or pray, to have a devotional at a certain time everyday. Some of these are private rituals; some are family and some are communal. But our rituals serve to connect us to our community of faith and enhance our understanding of and commitment to our God.

In our Gospel lesson this morning we see Joseph and Mary participating in some of the ancient and typical rituals that were then (and still are in some quarters today) a part of the Jewish culture. These rituals clearly identify and associate the holy family with God's covenant people. First there is the circumcision of Jesus in verse 21. Verse 22 refers to "their" purification and so applies both to the mother and the child. Forty days after giving birth a Hebrew mother would observe certain cleansing rites, including the sacrificial offering of a lamb or doves. Then there was a service of dedication for a first-born son. The story of Jesus' presentation in the temple and the subsequent blessing of God and the child by Simeon and Anna is a part of this service for the dedication for the first-born.

We have included Giotto's "Presentation of Christ in the Temple" on the cover of our bulletin today. Notice that Mary stands across from Simeon and Anna with her arms outstretched. Simeon's song will identify Jesus for the first time in public as God's promised one. There seems to be some separation anxiety on the face of both the child and his mother. It may well be that the artist is portraying the ominous words spoken by Simeon to the effect that "the child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel." Or perhaps his words to Mary that "a sword will pierce" her soul, reminding her of the costly sacrifice she would be making as this child's mother.

Clearly from our gospel text, Simeon's presence in the temple on this occasion and his knowledge of who this child is are the work of the Holy Spirit, who both "guided" him to the temple (vs. 27) and "revealed" to him (26) what he had come to understand about the child. The words of Simeon are said to have "amazed" his parents, but you really have to wonder how in the world they could have been amazed at anything given the rather amazing experiences they have been having over the past 10 months or so. But amazed they were nonetheless at what an old man and a stranger saw in their child now being presented in the temple.

Now let me point out one more truly amazing thing which brings us back to the subject of religious ritual. It has to do with the aged Anna who begins spontaneously to praise God and speak of how the child had come for the sake of redemption. The truth is that we should be more amazed by the testimony of Anna than we are by the testimony of Simeon. Why is this so? In the current issue of "Lectionary Homiletics" (Dec/Jan 2009) Craig Barnes, our Parramore Preacher in 2004 and the pastor of Shadyside Presbyterian Church in Pittsburg, writes as follows:

"Anna is the only person in the Nativity narratives who receives no miraculous guidance to find Jesus. No angel comes to her with the big news. No special word is offered from the Holy Spirit as Simeon received. No star guides her to the right place. Anna recognized the incarnation of God only because she had been talking to him for 84 years."

Here is the reward for religious ritual. Here is the beauty of those sacred routines and practices that attune us to God's presence and God's purposes. Day and night for 84 years Anna had been a fixture in God's temple --- praying, fasting, worshiping her God in complete devotion. She puts to shame the meager nature of our religious rituals, which in contrast require little of us. "Oh, do we have to go to church this Sunday? We have already been once this month!" Or, "Do I have to make a pledge really. Surely the church can function and the Lord's work can be done without my

participation.” Or, “If I take the time to read my Bible or say my prayers tonight, I could well miss Dave Letterman’s Top Ten List.” You see, some rituals demand so little of us that they cost us nothing significant and consequently mean very little to us. Let me remind you of what I said in last Sunday’s sermon: “A faith that costs you nothing is worth nothing to you.” And frankly, it is not worth much to anyone else either.

What rituals have you embraced? What rituals are you willing to embrace as you make your New Year’s Resolutions --- rituals that will better connect you to God’s presence, to God’s purposes, and to God’s people? You need not adopt Anna’s rigorous discipline of being in God’s house day and night, praying and fasting and worshiping. But we would be well advised to emulate Anna’s devotion if not her particular regimen. We all need habits and routines and practices that will keep us grounded in God, connected to one another and focused on our mission as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

No one can decide for another person the particular rituals which will serve that person best. We must make these decisions and these commitments ourselves and find in the process the practices and disciplines that prove most helpful to us. Reformed theology has always insisted that the Holy Spirit is free to use numerous means in relating to us, in growing us and in using us. Generally speaking, we think of participation in the preaching of the word, in prayer, and in the celebration of the sacraments as the primary “means of grace,” as they are called. But we could also include Christian service, Christian fellowship, and the reading and studying of God’s word as ways to connect with God’s presence, God’s purposes, God’s people, and yes, God’s power, if the Holy Spirit is present in these rituals and routines.

In closing let me simply challenge each of us in the coming year to do an inventory of our own religious practices and to commit ourselves to both old and new rituals in which God may better reach us and teach us and reveal to us what he would do in us and through us, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.