**First Reading Malachi 3:1-4**

*This reading concludes a larger section (2:17—3:5) in which the prophet speaks of the coming of the God of justice. Malachi looks for that day when the wondrous power of God will purify the priestly descendants of Levi who minister in the temple at Jerusalem.*

1 See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap; 3 he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

**Psalm 84**

1 How dear to me is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts! 2 My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God. 3 Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young, by the side of your altars, O Lord of hosts, my king and my God. 4 Happy are they who dwell in your house! They will always be praising you. 5 Happy are the people whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on the pilgrims’ way. 6 Those who go through the balsam valley will find it a place of springs, for the early rains have covered it with pools of water. 7 They will climb from height to height, and the God of gods will be seen in Zion. 8 Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob. 9 Behold our defender, O God; and look upon the face of your anointed. 10 For one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. 11 For the Lord God is both sun and shield, bestowing grace and glory; no good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk with integrity. 12 O Lord of hosts, happy are they who put their trust in you!

**Second Reading Hebrews 2:14-18**

*Jesus shared human nature fully so that his death might be for all humans a liberation from slavery to death’s power. Here the writer uses the image of priestly service in the temple as a way of describing the life and saving death of the Lord Jesus. He is the high priest who offers his life on behalf of his brothers and sisters.*

14 Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. 16 For

it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. 17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. 18 Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

**Gospel Luke 2:22-40**

*This story is a study in contrasts: the infant Jesus with the aged prophets; the joy of birth with the ominous words of Simeon to Mary; the faithful fulfilling of the law with the presentation of the one who will release its hold over us. Through it all, we see the light of God’s salvation revealed to the world.*

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”, 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27 Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, 29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” 33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” 36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. 39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they’re

turned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

**SERMON**

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.*

Did you wonder if you’d entered into a time warp this morning? Didn’t we already celebrate Christmas and all that goes with that? Why, after celebrating the baptism of a grown-up Jesus, and hearing about his first moments after his return from the wilderness, are we back at the Temple in Jerusalem, with baby Jesus and Mary and Joseph? Maybe Ricky Bobby was right, we do like Baby Jesus best!

If you’re a numbers person, you may have noticed that today is 40 days after Christmas. According to Jewish Law, as stated in Leviticus, a Jewish woman was to present herself in the Temple 40 days after the birth of a son (80 days if she had given birth to a daughter). This was intended to help her regain her strength and reunite her with God.

By the fourth century, the Eastern Christian church was celebrating this day as “The Meeting,” a reference to Jesus’ encounters with Simeon and Anna, and by extension, God’s meeting with the People. The Western Church emphasized Simeon’s song declaring that Christ is “a light for the revelation to the Gentiles.” In England this day is known as the festival of Candlemas, when all the candles to be used in the year’s worship services are blessed.

One of the early church bishops, St. Sophonius, who lived in the 600’s, declared: ...*Everyone should be eager to join the procession and to carry a light. Our lighted candles are a sign of the divine splendor of the one who comes to expel the dark shadows of evil and to make the whole universe radiant with the brilliance of his eternal light. Our candles also show how bright our souls should be when we go to meet Christ. ... So let us all hasten together to meet our God.*

Perhaps this evening, as it grows darker, we might each take a candle and light it while declaring, “Jesus Christ is the light of the world. The light no darkness can overcome,” and give thanks for the Christ light. What a blessing it is to know that no matter how dark our lives may feel at times, Christ continues to shine.

Now, as important as it is to celebrate Christ as the light of the world, my attention has been drawn to the celebration by the Eastern Church -- the feast of “The Meeting.” It brings to my mind a most important question: *pause*  “Did Jesus have grandparents?” We are aware of his cousin John the Baptizer, but what about his grandparents?

It’s not one of the deepest theological questions of the hour. There probably haven’t been any wars fought over it. But Luke’s report of Simeon and Anna’s encounters with Jesus make me wonder about Jesus’ extended family.

Did they hurry from Nazareth to Bethlehem when they received word of His birth? Did they dote over this grandchild as we modern day grandparents tend to do? Did Grandpa give “horsey rides?” Did Grandma buy him a new prayer shawl and sandals for his bar mitzvah? If Jesus was fully human like us, as the letter to the Hebrews declares, he must have had grandparents!

There are no stories about such grandparents other than a note in the genealogies, that Joseph’s father was named Heli or Jacob. Still, there is this report about Simeon and Anna, two representatives of grandparent age who meet Jesus with joy and gladness. Even more, they were the grand patriarch and matriarch of the Temple.

Simeon is described as one who was righteous and devout, a model and example of consistency in faith and service. The Holy Spirit rested on him. He was a man of vision and hope. It’s been my observation that often the most forward-looking people are the ones who have lived long, faithful lives. They have “seen it all” -- the best and the worst of humanity, and yet, they live in hope. They marvel at the birth of a child because they know that where there is life, there is hope.

What is unique about this encounter between Simeon and this child is that in Jesus, we have the hope of the world -- a hope not only for the chosen people of Israel, but for the world. As Simeon declares: “my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples.”

Simeon also brings the wisdom of many years. He knows that there will be turmoil and tension. He knows that Mary will feel the pain that most parents never have to face -- seeing her son die a most horrible death. He won’t keep that news from Mary, even though these words may leave her shaken.

And then there’s Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. After she was widowed Anna dedicated her entire life to the Temple, literally. She was there day and night, worshipping and fasting. She reminds me of the many women I have known over the years who center their lives around the church. They set the altar for Holy Communion. They rarely miss congregational gatherings. They prepare food for those in need, tend to restless children so their mothers can focus on worship, cheer up folks when things don’t go as planned, and

they watch with pride as each new generation steps forward in faith. They praise God for the endless signs of redemption.

Have you ever wondered what it might be like to live in the church like Anna lived in the Temple? Luke wrote that she never left. Imagine being able to focus all your time and energy in thought of God. Imagine the intimacy one would surely have with God. Is it any wonder that Anna was able to see in Jesus the redemption of Jerusalem? She had spent many years of her life preparing for a moment like this.

Together, Simeon and Anna illustrate the importance of a lifetime of spending time with God and allowing God’s Spirit to guide their lives. They reveal that this sort of intimacy is a lifelong adventure. We cannot expect to have the hope of Simeon or the joy of Anna if we keep God on the periphery of our lives. While I’m not recommending living 24/7 in the church building (although – what fun that would be in some of our older Gothic structures!), we can take advantage of opportunities to focus on God, and to pray, in groups and individually for God’s Spirit to guide us as the Spirit guided Anna and Simeon.

Even more, this “meeting” of Jesus, Mary and Joseph first with Simeon and then with Anna speaks of the value of the interaction of the generations. What a blessing it is for the young amongst us to share moments of faith with our elders. And vice-versa.

You know the African phrase, “It takes a village to raise a child.” It speaks of the importance of the community in growing healthy, well-rounded children. Parents do not have to “go it alone.” Instead, the Annas and the Simeons can step in and offer a hand.

Much in our secular culture presses for the separation of generations. The mobility of our society often means children grow up away from grandparents. The advances in technology can mean a huge gap between our older generations and our young ones. There is conflict between those who only want the “good old days,” and those who want to enter the future without remembering the past. There is often an unhealthy segmentation of the generations: residents of nursing homes often do not get to spend time with children, and youth become preoccupied with studies, sports, and work and miss time with their elders. The National Education Association lobbies for the same tax dollars that the American Association for Retired People wants.

Perhaps the church, with her image of being the whole Body of Christ is the last and most crucial place where generations can come together and coexist. The mission and ministry of a congregation needs to include all generations, and it is not an easy task. It isn’t easy to design a worship service which will appeal to both teenagers and senior citizens

Yet it is here, in this place, when we are gathered together, both the old and the young, both the searching and the confident, both the strong and the weak, the rich and the poor, the proud and the humble, that we are able to know God’s grace, fully and completely. Here we are knit together as one holy catholic church. Here we tell the old, old story to the new generation of believers. Here we have our Simeons and Annas, our Marys and Josephs, and our babies.

Here we have Jesus -- the Light of the World, and our salvation. He is the best news in the world, and he is the Word for all generations. Let us join together with all the Simeons and Annas of our lives and sing the praise of salvation for our world. And then, let us be the Simeons and the Annas needed for this church, and for the world. Amen