

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

THE FEAST OF CANDLEMAS

A sermon preached 5th of February 2017, the 5th Sunday after the Epiphany, The Solemnity of Candlemas, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Malachi 3. 1–2 and Luke 2. 22–38.

Thus says the Lord, 'Behold, 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. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?

— Malachi 3. 1 – 2

Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the Spirit he came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel."

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phan'u-el, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years from her virginity, and as a widow till she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she gave thanks to God, and spoke of him to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

— Luke 2. 22

On the 2nd of February, many of you were here at 9 o'clock for Sung Compline by candlelight. We observed The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord. We call it, also, Candlemas because Christians since the seventh century have celebrated a ceremony by that name peculiar to the day. Compline is the church getting ready for bed; St Stephen's Choir tucking you in. At 9:25, as you left to get into your pajamas, you said two things: "Wow!" and, "When do we get to do *that* again?" We'll do it again on March 9th.

This church was lit only by candles, two hundred and twenty of them. Your faces were lit as if by fireflies. It was magical. It was the official end of Christmas. It was time travel. The choir sang us back to the moment when Mary and Joseph, forty days after Jesus' birth, presented him in the temple. The light of Jesus shone upon the eyes of old Simeon there, and he said,

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace
according to thy word.

For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
Which thou hast prepared before the face of
all people;

To be a light to lighten the Gentiles and to be
the glory of thy people Israel.

Today is the Solemnity of Candlemas. Go with me now back to the 5th century BC, to the days of Malachi. In the second chapter of the book bearing his name, we read: "You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord and he is pleased with them,' or, 'Where is the god of justice?'"

This is another way of stating what philosophers call the problem of evil. If God is good and all-powerful, why is it so obvious that things could be better?

Malachi lived in a period following the Babylonian captivity by a hundred years. It's about 450 BC. The Persians had become ascendant, and in a remarkably enlightened policy, they had permitted the Israelites to go back to their homes.

But by Malachi's day, Judea was in a severe downturn, a shadow of its former self. To get a sense of how small and vulnerable she was, we could drive from St Stephen's past Mill Valley to Sausalito, go over the Golden Gate Bridge, continue to the Ferry Building in San Francisco, cross the Bay Bridge to Oakland, take 580 north to the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge, then come back to Tiburon. Do that and you've circumscribed an

area roughly the size of Judea in Malachi's day. Within its borders lived a population only slightly larger than that of Petaluma. Judea was a postage-stamp-sized nation. There was unending opposition and harassment from the neighbors. To the north, the Samaritans. To the east, the Ammonites. To the south, the Arabs. And to the west, the Phoenicians.

In addition to the political difficulty, there was economic privation. Jerusalem had to send tribute over to the Persian empire and its capital cities. This is what you get for being the chosen people now returned to the "Promised Land."

What was worse, they were spiritually destitute. God's presence in Israel's midst was only a memory. The temple had been rebuilt by this time, but the people old enough to remember the first one, the temple Solomon built, wept when they saw it. Physically it was unimpressive. The harder part was that spiritually it was devoid of the presence of God.

When the original tabernacle had been fabricated under Moses, the book of Exodus closes by telling us how the glory of the Lord came down and *filled* the tabernacle. The pillar of fire and cloud that had led Israel through the wilderness and across the Red Sea and, during her wanderings, up to Sinai, came *down* on Mt. Sinai in a massive theophany that all could observe, then took up its habitation in the holy of holies. The Bible says that the cloud *settled* upon it, and the *glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle*. Moses himself could not enter the tent of meeting.

In about 950 BC, five hundred years before Malachi, Solomon built the first temple, basing it on the model of the tabernacle. He doubled the size, making it more glorious, with more gold and all the rest, the holy of holies in it designed to be the 'permanent' dwelling place of God. And we're told the Most High filled the holy of holies with his presence.

Not so for the second temple. And Malachi responds to this agonizing hope by way of a promise, "Behold, I will send my messenger who will prepare my way before me, then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come," says the Lord Almighty."

So do you see what Malachi is saying to his contemporaries? *You want the God of justice? Be careful what you wish for, because you can't imagine what you're asking.* It's like the fabled kite experiment of Benjamin Franklin. The story goes that he put up a kite in a thunderstorm inviting lightning to strike so that it would travel down the wet kite string, reach the metallic key at its end, then run down a wire into a Leiden jar. Franklin wrote up that experiment. That much is true. But there's no evidence that he performed it. A Baltic German physicist did. Georg Wilhelm Richmann, deserves credit for having the courage to do it. What followed was the unfortunate result. A charge of a hundred million volts ran through his body, leapt from the moistened line of the kite to his forehead, causing his clothes to burn, his shoes to explode, and the lab door to be blown off its hinges. This is why we know Ben didn't try this at home.

You want the God of justice? You have no idea what you're asking for. You're like Franklin or Richmann looking for the lightning. *That's* the crisis Malachi and, nearly five hundred years after him, John the Baptist understood. The power we invoke won't just hit the kite. It'll come down the string, arc onto your forehead, and blow your shoes off!

Malachi's contemporaries, like those of John the Baptist, want the God of justice to come, because they assume that when that happens it will all be at the expense of somebody else, the Persian or the Roman enemies, the godless people wrecking our lives. "Where is the god of justice?" Malachi responds to that question with something Handel would put in the mouth of a soprano: "But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire."

Candlemas is a Feast to celebrate. The God of justice returns to the temple. The glory of the Most High comes down, ineffable power locating in the 'rheostat' of Jesus' body. God's strength made perfect in weakness, Mary and Joseph carry their son into the temple, and let an old man hold him in his bare hands. And Simeon's face, like yours the other night, is lit up as if by fireflies.

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

St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA, Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501, or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org