

O Come all Ye Faithful Readings: Luke 2:22-40; Malachi 3:1-4 Feast of the Presentation/C
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Atascadero CA 2/2/25

"When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord." (Luke 2) If you are wondering why I selected the gospel hymn, "O Come all ye Faithful," it is because today I would like to talk about being faithful: Faithful to God, faithful to our religious practices, faithful to our baptismal vows, faithful in our actions, and faithful to one another. To be faithful is to be reliable, steadfast, and unwavering in our commitment to God and to those we love.

A few weeks ago, I received an email from a friend who sent out this message to a number of people. She wrote: "To be a Christian, you have to believe Jesus was divine as well as human." She ended the email with the instruction: "No explanation needed. Just yell back at me, true or false." What a strange litmus test for determining Christian faithfulness! It reminded me of some of the evangelicals who declare "Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior" and then go about their lives without following Jesus' commands to have mercy and care for the poor, the immigrant, the lost, the lonely, and the left behind. When one's faith walk is based solely on belief or some philosophical idea, it becomes easier to distance ourselves from Jesus' commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves, especially when the going gets tough.

For me, being a Christian means to follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. I believe Jesus is the Word of God in human form, a template for the way humanity should think and act. That is why before I vote, before I make a major decision that involves other people, and before I form a strong opinion, I often ask: What would Jesus think and do? Am I being faithful to my baptismal vows to seek and serve Christ in all persons? Do I strive for justice and peace among all people, while respecting the dignity of every human being? (BCP 239) What are the criteria you use for measuring your own faithfulness to God in Christ? What kind of questions do you ask yourself? Let's take a closer look at today's biblical readings to gain some insight into faithful living.

In our first reading from the prophet Malachi, we hear a messenger passing judgment on the religious leaders of his time for being lax with their religious responsibilities. Not only did they violate standard temple practices, but the people under their care were floundering in their devotion to God and the Law. It was into this context some 2500 years ago, that Malachi declared the need for God to purify the people of Israel by prophesying: "God will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness." (Malachi 3) I think all of us can get lax when it comes to our Christian duty to be faithful. Many Christians seem to be floundering in their faith walk today, arguing that some of Jesus' more difficult teachings (like the Sermon on the Mount) are just "too woke" to be taken seriously. Perhaps we too need to be purified, both in character and behavior, so that we can be that steadfast light that shines in the dark corners of our world. And as you all are aware, it is pretty dark out there in our country and world today.

Our gospel reading tells us of Mary and Joseph who faithfully followed the religious practices of their time. This included circumcising Jesus on the 8th day of life. Then, after Mary's purification, they presented Jesus to the Lord in the temple according to Jewish Law which said: "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord." (Lev. 12) After Jesus was presented to the Lord, it was then that they received God's blessing through Simeon and Anna who also predicted Jesus' future vocation.

Essential to Judaism is the praise of God in all aspects of life. The Jewish Law taught that God was to be honored in one's rising up and lying down, in going out and coming in, in how one dressed and what one ate. In addition to these daily reminders, there were a number of religious rituals that faithful Jews participated in as a way to remain connected to God during transitions in life. A few were mentioned in today's gospel reading.

Religious observances are not only important in Jewish tradition but are also an integral part in the life of a Christian. They strengthen our relationship with God and remind us to whom we belong. These rituals include the sacraments of baptism & confirmation, participating in Holy Communion and in the prayers, the reading of Scripture, confession, reciting our baptismal vows on a regular basis, the blessing of a marriage, the funeral rite, the lighting of the Advent wreath, and the celebration of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost just to name a few of the holy days. But with the pressures of secularism and modern-life busyness, ritual observances in the lives of most Christians have been reduced, particularly among the younger generation.

As a result, “God has receded from their awareness and experience of every day life. Their lives move in a secular realm devoid of the presence of the holy. Their daily experiences are reduced and impoverished. They have no meaning beyond themselves, no opening to transcendence.” (NIB) In its place, they have filled that empty void by watching television, spending hours on social media, shopping in the malls, eating, drinking, perusing Amazon.com, seeking entertainment, and striving for bigger, better, faster and more. While these activities fill up their days, they do little to strengthen their character or increase their capacity to love.

Perhaps reflection on today’s gospel of the ‘Presentation of Jesus in the Temple’ can serve to challenge modern day believers to recover the mystery of life and the transcendence of everyday experience through ritual celebration. Where is God to be found? Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in the midst of them.” (Mt. 18:20) The danger, however, in following ritual observances alone, is the false belief that simple adherence to external religious practices will make us pure in heart. We all know about the hypocrisy of the pharisees in Jesus’ time who followed the law and yet lived with a hardness of heart. We also know of the hypocrisy of the Christian Nationalists in our own time. These are the ones who claim to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior yet have transformed Jesus Christ from “a humble servant of the abject poor to a symbol that stands for gun rights, prosperity theology, anti-science, and a limited government that neglects the destitute.” (Rainn Wilson)

The challenge for modern-day Christians is to find effective rituals for celebrating the presence of God in the ordinary while at the same time, working on healing their inner woundedness and character. What are your practices for faithful living? Do you offer prayers of gratitude and thanksgiving? Do you work on forgiving those who have hurt you or pray for your enemies? How do you celebrate the goodness of life and all the blessings you have received? Where do you get your inspiration and strength to carry on in a world filled with sadness and difficulties? I would love to hear about your own spiritual practices that keep you faithful.

When I think about Joseph and Mary, I admire their courage in moving forward in their dark corner of the world. Perhaps it was their deep connection to God, their faithful living, and their observances of religious practices that allowed them to put one foot in front of the other despite all the obstacles they faced. Just think about it. Here was a woman who got pregnant out of wedlock and a man who was not the father. At the height of her pregnancy, she was required to leave her home to be registered in Bethlehem for the purpose of taxation. Imagine being nine months pregnant and having to walk for 10 days to reach your destination! To top it off, Mary and Joseph existed in an oppressive society, taxed by rulers, who demanded as much as 50% of what the common people grew and owned. Those who could not pay these taxes had their lands confiscated. And yet, despite these circumstances, they did not despair. Instead, they presented their first-born child to the Lord in the Temple, giving thanks for his birth and the gift of life. In return, they received a blessing that was life changing.

What are your faithful practices? For me, when it comes to religious observances, I try to keep to a daily routine. It is what keeps me grounded when things go south. One of my practices includes making the sign of the cross on my lips when I awake, saying: “Lord open my lips so that my mouth shall proclaim your praise.” Next, I sit in my chair with a cup of coffee, reciting Morning Prayer from the Book of Common Prayer. During that time, I pray for those in need, including political leaders with whom I disagree. Before each meal, Steph and I offer a prayer of thanks for the food we are about to eat and read a meditation from the booklet, “Day by Day.” As I leave the house, I bless myself with holy water from the font, saying: “remember who you are!” Each night before I go to sleep, I list the things that I am grateful for and ask for a peaceful night of rest. I tithe 10% of my income. Because I preach twice per month, I study the Scriptures with a focus on the Sunday readings. This is not only an intellectual exercise to help me prepare for my preaching, but it is also an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to enlighten my thinking, soften my heart, and purify my thoughts. I too need to work on my inner woundedness, including letting go of events from the past.

Faithfulness in living does not mean that we will be perfect. It does not mean that we won’t struggle or make poor decisions. But it does mean that we are committed to staying connected to God, thereby strengthening our faith walk. It means we will try to follow the commandments even when life is difficult or when our ego prefers to take a different path. We are the ones who are now called to present ourselves to God with pure and clean hearts. May God give us the grace to do so.