

Happy Candlemas!

Candlemas is a Christian holiday celebrated every year on February 2. Since that date only falls on a Sunday every 7 or 8 years, we don't get chance to celebrate it in church often. Candlemas marks three specific events.

Those of us who love the old testament remember fondly the ancient traditions about purification rites & rituals. In the ancient world there are whole burnt offerings, wave offerings, seed offerings...

What we are reading about this morning is the story of Mary presenting herself to the priests to be declared clean. Women who had given birth were considered ritually unclean for 40 days after the birth of a child. After 40 days they were required to present themselves to the priests to be declared clean. It was a standard purification rite.

Now, Jesus is a firstborn son. According to the same Hebraic Law- all firstborn sons must be dedicated to God in the temple. So- we have the purification of Mary, and the dedication of Jesus, all according to custom.

Centuries later, another ritual was added to this date: the blessing of all the candles we use in the church during the church year.

Purifications, dedications, blessings: all were common, ordinary things in the life of a Jew of Jesus' time. So why do we especially remember this day? Because an ordinary ritual became extraordinary by the arrival of two prophets, Simeon and Anna.

Simeon declares he can now die in peace, because his own eyes have seen in Jesus the greatness of God.

It's the work of prophets to read the signs—or to see what is going on in their current times--and speak out about them. Think about all the Old Testament prophets—they speak out for God about the possibilities in store for the people of God. And prophets always speak for justice.

Prophets are our spiritual warriors. Prophets speak out loudly when injustice becomes the norm in the lives of the people of God.

And prophecies shed light on our possible futures-- but it's up to us to choose which future. There are an almost infinite number of possible futures we can choose from, and since prophets are *a/ways* concerned with justice, they try and steer us towards the most equitable future for all of God's creatures and all of creation.

Simeon and Anna, both describe a future that had never been seen before-- one where Jesus would be a living Sign to everyone -- he would show us how life should be lived, how life should be loved, and point us in the direction of the in-breaking Kingdom. He would be a “light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of Israel.”

Jesus' life was like a beacon, calling everyone to him. But light doesn't just call us towards it. Light illuminates everything around it.

Simeon says that Jesus will be a “sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” What does that mean? Like most prophecies, it's open to interpretation.

The light of Christ is like a million floodlights--shining on us, and how we live our lives. This light can illuminate how we follow him—and how we don't follow him. This light will reveal our hearts. There's nothing like a light shining in the house of our soul to show us all our cobwebs, our clutter, and the things we hoard jealously. The light helps us to acknowledge where we may need interior work.

That's where Simeon and Anna and ALL prophets come in: they show us where we may be going wrong on that arc that bends towards justice. A prophet pierces our souls. Prophets show us glory.

And prophets say the things we might not want to hear.

For example: defenders of slavery argued that slavery had existed throughout history and was justified by the Bible. In the 1700's William

Wilberforce, an English politician, philanthropist, and leader of the movement to abolish the slave trade, prophetically railed against people who denied the evils of enslaving other human beings: He said: *“You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know.”*

Wilberforce’s words about justice made humanity rethink slavery and made a world without it possible.

Women called Suffragettes fought for women's rights. At the turn of the 20th century, suffragettes were scorned by most men and some women, and were vilified by all religious leaders because these women had the audacity to say that they too had the intellectual capacity to participate in worldly matters. Susan B Anthony said, “Oh, if I could but live another century and see the fruition of all the work for women! There is so much yet to be done.” Her vision, her words of a future where women would be considered equally capable is coming to fruition.

Prophets read the signs of the times and speak out about them. And they show us possible futures filled with justice for all the people of God. Martin Luther King Jr. preached that “love on the level of society looks like justice.”

His prophetic words call us into one possible future, just as Simeon’s calls the people of the first century to a future glowing with the light of peace, justice and love to enlighten all the nations.

May we be blessed by all the prophets this year-- like the candles that illuminate our church. May we be alert to the prophetic light among us, and may we carry Christ’s light into a world that craves illuminating light.

Happy Candlemas. Amen.