

Today is the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus, when we celebrate his first entry into the Temple, and his encounter with Simeon and Anna, prophetic elders who discern and proclaim his vocation, his calling—the fullness of who he is.

For Luke, the story begins with the faithfulness of Jesus' parents, who trek with their newborn baby to Jerusalem. *Can you imagine? When I had a newborn, I could hardly get to the grocery store a mile away—and I had a car!*

Why would they do this? Because, Luke tells us (3 times, in 3 short, opening verses, to be sure we get it), they are faithful to God's laws. They're honoring two ritual obligations: the purification of a mother after childbirth, and the presentation of a firstborn to God.

If you look up the Greek word Luke uses, you get two definitions for “**present**.” First, it means, “to **place** beside or near,”—to offer or show or provide. And it also means “to **stand** beside or near, to be at hand, be present.”

Thus, in presenting their son, Mary and Joseph not only bring him before God and their community, but they also commit to stand by him. Which Mary does. Even when he worries her or snaps at her, when others turn against him, even when he is executed. Their faith in God *and* in their son grounds him as he grows into his own faith, and into his God-given identity. //

But Mary and Joseph are not the only ones who “*present*” this child.

Living at the temple is a devout, old man named Simeon. He's guided by the Holy Spirit. He's been holding out hope for the consolation of his people, though many others gave up long ago.

When our poor, ragtag couple enters—the kind of couple most people wouldn't notice, or sit near--, Simeon stops what he's doing to take their travel-weary baby into his arms—just as a priest holds an infant for baptism. And he beams, *with the tender pride I saw on my grandfather's face when he held his great-grandbaby.*

Then, Simeon also “*presents*” Jesus. He thanks God for *God's* faithfulness, and for this new life--so *small but already full*. *A life that is hope, fulfilled.*

Simeon sees who this child is and what he is called to be, *now*, before Jesus has achieved anything. Before he's started teaching and healing; before he's

figured out what he wants to do when he grows up, or gotten into a good college, or earned his first paycheck.

Simeon sees that this baby's purpose extends beyond the Temple's walls: he'll be a light to *all* people, and he'll stretch the imagination of his own religious leaders, calling them back to God's will for mercy and radical love.

Anna, an elderly and faithful widow, also "presents" Jesus: she also sees him, and praises God, and speaks about him to all who will listen.

"Presenting" remains an important part of Christian life today. We **"present"** candidates for baptism, confirmation, and ordination; parents present their children for marriage. In all these rites, when we present someone, we place them before God and our community, *and* we commit to accompany them as they grow into their new identity.

We present **ourselves**, too. In the Holy Eucharist, we "present" our offering of praise and thanksgiving. In our daily efforts to do God's will, we present our lives to God and one another.

That is **"vocation."**

Of course, I'm aware that this may not fit with some of the myths about vocation and discernment, about purpose and calling, that we may have internalized.

One of those myths is that discernment is about the future, and that vocation is *"what I want to do when I grow up."* Catch that? It's what I *"do,"* or *earn*. So, we may assume that youth have to *wait* to be ministers or theologians, or to have anything to offer. Or that we have to get our own lives together before we can do any good for God or other people. And I've got news folks—that will be a long wait.

But Anna and Simeon remind us that we *all* have lives to share *now*—no matter how old we are or how confused, or how far from where we think we should be. That vocation is much more about "who we are and what we offer the world right now."ⁱ

A second myth is that discernment leads to a singular, rational decision, after which things will progress clearly and easily. Oh, how I wish that were true!

But, on the contrary, discernment emerges not through thinking, but through living; vocation unfolds through the twists and turns of life--through conflict, doubt, detours, disappointments.

Indeed, Simeon discerns Jesus' calling long before Jesus understands or consents to his parents' faith: Simeon sees that he will be an opposed sign that makes people, and nations, face difficult truths; and that a sword will pierce his mother's soul. *Where's the easy in that?*

A third myth is that vocation and discernment are personal, private matters: that *I'm* on a solitary quest to figure it all out, and how to do it; and that once I've figured it out, it's up to **me** to make it happen. –And that my life will have no meaning until I've got my vocation wrapped up in a neat little box that all can see and admire.

But Simeon and Anna show that discernment is communal; that God speaks through others, through those who *see* us and “reflect back to us what they see, imagine, or hope.”ⁱⁱ And they show that my vocation is not just for me; it's for God and others, and it's bound up with God's call to all of us, to love God and one another. //

Today's Feast reminds us to be this community, where vocation is discerned, and proclaimed, and supported; where people are presented to God and to one another—and where Christ is presented to all who seek him.

Now, I know this sounds abstract, so let me suggest a concrete place to start: youth ministry, which is about much more than Sunday school and EYC.

Want to know what makes a good youth ministry? All of us. *All* of us—awesome kids who care about each other. And caring adults. Lots of them. Whole churches of them.

As you know or remember, youth are on a particularly intense, confusing leg of our common journey toward identity and vocation. And youth ministry is about *our* call to “present” them. To accompany them on this journey, and listen, and help them “imagine their lives as full of potential to heal a broken world.”ⁱⁱⁱ It's about our call to receive their ministry, and to be led by them, as well.

In fact, as authors Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer suggest, churches just might discern “a new call developing, to the extent that [they] allow themselves

to be flexible in embracing a new generation’s needs, desires, and responsiveness to the world.”^{iv}

Conceived of this way, youth ministry is a ministry in which we are *all* involved.

Some of us, like Mary and Joseph, are parents or grandparents or nurturers of children, called to bring them up in the patterns of Christianity and our own faithfulness. Called to grow with them and stand by them, even as they make us angry or challenge the traditions we so value.

Some of us are elders, spiritually mature leaders—note that I didn’t say anything about age.—spiritually mature leaders, who have hard-earned wisdom to share with young people, or with people who are young in faith—who have traveled ahead and can tell us what the road ahead looks like. Some are insiders, called to welcome strangers, to make room for newcomers, and to draw out one another’s gifts.

Some are infants, dependent, like Jesus, on the faith of those around us. At some point, every one of us will reach the edge of what we know; our certainty will give out; our lives will generate new, difficult questions for which our old answers no longer suffice. We will be thrust, or called, into the unknown. At some point, all of us will have to begin again, and we will depend on those who still know how to pray, and who can still say the Nicene Creed without crossing their fingers behind their backs.

And, some of us are youth, **longing** to live meaningful, authentic lives—longing to offer ourselves to God, and to heal a hurting world. **Brimming** with questions and challenges and new vision. Searching, longing, hoping. Again, this is not just about age.

To you, to all of us, who long to offer our lives to God—I say, “Go on— take risks—be bold! Be yourself! Ask your questions. Challenge your tradition, because it is yours, after all.” We’ve got your back. We’re standing by you, and we’re not going anywhere.

ⁱ Dori Baker and Joyce Ann Fletcher, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests* (Pilgrim Press, 2007), 9.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 46.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 46.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 46.