

[Readings: Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 24; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40]

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, after the last Sunday Mass, she would stay in church. She kept herself busy gathering the discarded bulletins, spilled Cheerios, and dropped tissues from the pews. She never talked to anyone, but would smile if they acknowledged her.

Of indeterminate age, widowed decades in the past, she once was the parish sacristan assigned to replace the burned-down daily and weekly wax candles lit at the side altars by parishioners, until the wax candles were replaced by safer and cleaner, electric ones. Without that task, she created her job of Official Cleaner of the Pews, with one condition. She stayed and did it only on those Sundays when Baptisms had been scheduled. Her task completed, she would silently join with the families gathered for the ceremony, smiling as if she was remembering happier times from her past. Since no one knew her, everyone thought she was from the other side of the family. Occasionally, she'd even slip quietly into the group photo of everyone there. A few times she was able to hold the baby for a picture with no one questioning her.

Imagine when the family relooked at those pictures years later, husband and wife asking each other who she was and both responding they thought she was a part of the other's family. She wasn't a grandmother or aunt or neighbor or friend, just someone who found hope and consolation in children newly blessed and ready to face their future. That surely was what sustained her. She sounds a lot like the prophetess Anna in today's Gospel.

Here's the Good News for those who've just had a baby: You get to take home a bundle of love who will be the apple of your eye for years to come. It's like being born again yourself. Wonder will come to live at your house. Your lineage will continue. The world has a future. Who knows what this child will accomplish? The possibilities of this new life are endless.

Here's the Bad News: This baby will cry, wet, and need you without mercy for years to come. This child arrives with a huge price tag: a commitment that costs dollars, time, privacy, personal goals, sleepless nights, and nonstop worry.

There will be disappointments, grief, and rejection up ahead. The possibilities for heartache are endless.

All moms and dads get mixed reviews about their new career as parents. As a survival tactic they tend to selectively forget the bad news and focus their hope and energy on the good. The news that Mary and Joseph got when they brought Jesus to the Temple that day, however, was more extreme than usual. An old man they'd never met insisted their son would be a success story for his nation and a path for foreigners to follow. He would be a game-changer for the powerful and the voiceless alike. He would face great opposition and cause great suffering -- to his mother; the absence of his father in this prediction sounded ominous. Meanwhile, at the sight of their baby, a prophetess immediately gave thanks for his life and began to tell everyone that God's ancient promises were about to come true.

After Anna encounters Jesus, we hear that Jesus goes to Nazareth with his family, growing in strength and wisdom. Family homes are places of physical encounters. Moms and dads hugging kids, caring for them in their sickness, teaching them to perform household tasks. This is the mystery of family life taken up by the Word made flesh.

Jesus saves, therefore, not by abandoning the physical world, but entering more deeply into it. As Hebrews describes, since we're flesh and blood, contingent beings who bleed and die, God enters that physical material condition through the Incarnation of the Son. He becomes the High Priest who offers back to the Father our physicality, our flesh-and-blood lives, redeeming us in the process. After all, this is the purpose of the Church. We're saved not when we recognize that Jesus is our savior. We're saved when our bodies are plunged into the baptismal waters of salvation, when our lips speak the words of the Holy Scripture, when we eat and drink Christ's Body and Blood, and when we adore Christ in the hungry and thirsty and homeless bodies of the poor.

According to the Church's liturgical calendar, the feast held on Feb. 2 each year is in honor of the Presentation of the Lord. Some Catholics recall this day as the feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary because such was

the feast day named until the 1969 changes in the Church's calendar. It was also called the Feast of the Circumcision.

In fact, according to Luke's Gospel, the presentation of Jesus and the purification of the Blessed Mother took place in the Temple on the same day, and both are remembered during Mass on Feb. 2. Also, in several countries, Candlemas is simultaneously celebrated on this day and involves a blessing of candles and a procession that was popularized in the Middle Ages. Until the Second Vatican Council the feasts on Feb. 2 ended the Christmas season. Today, the season ends in January on the feast of the Baptism of our Lord.

Under Mosaic Law found in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus, a Jewish woman who gave birth to a child was considered ritually unclean (see 12:1-8). Not morally unclean, not sinfully unclean, ritually unclean. The mother of a newborn could not routinely go out into public and had to avoid all things sacred, including the Temple. If her child was a male, this exclusion lasted for 40 days. If the child was female, the period lasted 80 days. This was a ceremonial seclusion and not the result of sin or some kind of wrongdoing on the part of the mother.

At the end of the 40 or 80 days the woman presented herself at the Temple to be purified. If the baby was her firstborn male child, the infant was brought along to the Temple to be dedicated to the Lord. That's what happens in today's Gospel. The law in Exodus specifies that the first male child belongs to God (see 13:2-16). This law is a tribute to God for His sparing the firstborn Israelite males during the time of the Exodus from Egypt. The first Passover, when the Angel of Death passed over the firstborn Israelite children and took the lives of the firstborn Egyptian children.

When you hit the "enter" button on a keyboard or keypad, you confirm a transaction or get a path to information you desire. You await the completion of the task, as in today's Gospel reading we are reminded of the waiting for a child whose presentation fulfilled the promise of salvation.

Today's questions to reflect upon today and during the week:

What are you waiting for to fulfill your life on earth?

What blessing gives you an entryway to an eternal relationship with God?

Today is also Boy Scout Sunday. I would like to thank Boy Scout Troop 1954 for their presence and service in our parish. Every year, there is some project that they volunteer to do, to beautify our parish grounds and buildings, and they help at our Tree Trimming service.

Last, but not least, Pope Francis has designated February 2<sup>nd</sup> as the World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life. This is to honor all the men and women religious who have dedicated themselves as a consecrated man or woman. This includes our own Sr. Pat Whalen, who has been a faithful servant and spouse of Christ for over fifty years. Sr. Pat, we are blessed to have you here to serve and to minister! Thank you for being a light of faith for us in our parish community, and for me personally. May all of us be and become a light to break into the darkness of the world, “a light for all the nations.” AMEN!