

Candlemas at the Center of the Cosmos

Opening

All the way there would have been a climb. From Bethlehem to the Temple was 5 ½ miles. That was a small journey compared with the trek Mary and Joseph made from Nazareth to Bethlehem forty days prior. But still they were climbing, going up to Jerusalem. Once they reached their destination, there was still more climbing to do. Mount Zion isn't a metaphor; for good reason the location of the temple was called the Temple **mount**.

In the courts of the Temple, Mary and Joseph brought their newborn son, Jesus, along with two turtledoves for a ritual sacrifice, ascending the stairs until they reached the outer courts, the court of the Gentiles. Then they came to the gate called Beautiful. The metals of that beautiful gate, adorned with Corinthian brass, signified they were entering holy space. From the Beautiful Gate, the metals become finer and finer—brass, then silver, and finally inside the Holy Place—gold.

Mary and Joseph, of course, would not enter the Temple's most inner courts. Their terminus was the court of women, just on the other side of the Beautiful Gate. At the far end of the women's court was the Gate of Nicanor where they would meet a priest, presenting their humble sacrifice.

They were not permitted to proceed through the Gate of Nicanor which led to the court of Israel, nor beyond that to the court of priests, further still into the Holy Place which ended in a veil covering the Holy of Holies, the sanctuary of God's Temple, his presence among his people.

To enter the Temple was to enter a microcosm—or rather, *the* micro cosmos.

The gates, the fine metals, the basins of water, the numerous candles, all these fixtures were meant to reflect the elements of creation, the Garden of Eden. Creation is a Temple and the

Temple resembles creation. God is the center of the cosmos just as the Holy of Holies is the center of the Temple. Here was the beauty of holiness, the glory of Israel.

Now imagine the scene we have: in the arms of a virgin mother there rests a 40 day old baby. He is the One who has come from the Holy of Holies that is heaven, from beyond space and time. The Lord has come into his very own Temple in the most vulnerable form. Now the humility of Jesus is at the very center, not only of the Temple, but the whole cosmos.

A Humble Offering

We see the humility in the form, not only of Jesus' infant body, but in the turtledoves. The commanded sacrifice for a firstborn son from Leviticus was a lamb. Bring a lamb to the priest as a sacrifice for your firstborn son. Yet in Israel a concession was given for a poor mother, such as Mary. "If the mother cannot afford a lamb, bring two turtledoves."

So Mary, not Joseph, must present these two turtledoves to the priest for a sacrifice. Yet we know that she holds the Lamb of God, forty days young, in her arms.

The attending priest receives no mention in this story. Instead our vision turns to an elderly man. He bears no office of which we are aware. Luke would probably have told us if he were a priest or scribe. No, Simeon is simply known for his devotion. He is a man of patient endurance.

When Jesus is fully grown he will tell a parable of three soils—rocky soil, soil infested with thorns, and good, fertile soil. Simeon is the man of the third soil: he heard the word of the Lord, held fast to it with a good and noble heart, and waited with patient endurance.¹

Simeon, contrary to so many of the priests of that temple, was led by the Holy Spirit. We associate dynamism and charisma with people who are led by the Holy Spirit. Here is an

¹Luke 8.15

aged man, a long-suffering man, and **he** is the image of obedience to the Holy Spirit of God.

Wherever, whenever, or however, a priest received Mary and Joseph we are not told. We find a prophet when we are looking for a priest. A man who was not a prophet by office but by divine appointment for *this moment*.

Now Simeon *must* have had an affect of the Holy Spirit upon him. How else can you explain permitting a stranger, an old man, to take your newborn son in his arms?

And there near the Gate of Nicanor, Simeon raised Jesus in his arms saying,

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”²

For those who *were* looking for Israel’s Messiah, it would not be a surprise that the Christ would be the glory of Israel. What no one expected was a Jewish Messiah who would bring light to the nations. Just on the other side of the gate called Beautiful, where Gentiles circulated, this child would bring light to their own darkness. The light of God has come for all people. The numerous candles that burned with God’s light in the candelabras of the Holy Place would not be contained in the sanctuary. The candle light of God will shine on the nations. Now you know how we get the candle in Candlemas.

The Sign of Contradiction

Simeon has more to say after his hymn of praise. The Holy Spirit is the Giver of life; the kingdom of God is joy and peace in the Holy Spirit. Yet the Holy Spirit leads Simeon into

²Luke 2.29-32

another truth—a solemn truth. He does not address Joseph. To Mary, Simeon, led by the Holy Spirit, says:

Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”³

Another translation for this verse foretells “a sign of contradiction.” The sign is obscure at the time, but we know Israel will be shaken by this sign. Some will rise in Israel. We’ve already had another glimpse of that future in Mary’s song, the Magnificat. The Lord has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate.

Yet the falling of the strong, the exaltation of the humble will only come with the sign of contradiction. A sign of disfigurement, the crucifix of Golgotha. On Golgotha Mary’s soul will be pierced by the sign of contradiction; that God the Son who came from the Holy of Holies will hang on a tree.

But only when this child is lifted on the cross, only through the sign of contradiction will the veil be rent in two in the Holy Place. Only by the atoning sacrifice of the Lamb of God will the sins of the world be cleansed from all unrighteousness.

The Cross and the Center of the Cosmos

More than any other event in the Gospels (I believe), Candlemas unites the nativity of Jesus with the cross of Jesus. There is no Gospel if Christmas be separated from Golgotha. There is no light for the nations unless the Holy Spirit leads Simeon to the infant Jesus. Candlemas stitches this story together.

And it also changes the way we understand the world. Every moment of this scene occurs in the Temple courts, the microcosm of the universe.

³Luke 2.34-35

To understand the universe in its *truth*, you had to enter the Temple. But everything changed when Simeon prophesied the sign of contradiction in the middle of the Temple. For there, by divine inspiration, we see the universe anew—through the lens of this contradictory sign: the Lamb of God sacrificed on the hard wood of the cross.

Candlemas, the presentation of Jesus in the Temple, marks a fault line in human history. Now we must see God's world—natural creation, the events of history, the unforeseen future, our very own lives—through the sign of the cross. John Howard Yoder said, "those who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe." Those who take up their cross; those who do not run from their own suffering; these are the ones who are mending creation, healing relationships by humility and patient endurance. The sign of contradiction—the cross—becomes a paradox in their lives. They are pressed, but not crushed; persecuted, not abandoned; struck down, not destroyed. Forget what the news says matters or doesn't matter—here is the center of gravity for the universe: the cross of Jesus Christ.

The cross of Jesus is not only a sign of contradiction, it is a paradox. For in spite of the hardships endured by the cross, saints find freedom and they shine with the glory and beauty of God. In his light, in his service, in his cross is perfect freedom.

Saints of God, now we are the temple of God, signed with the cross of Christ, ordained by baptism to be his priests, the bearers of Jesus' light and life in this present darkness. May the glory of the Lord be upon us and may we radiate the beauty of God on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.