

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on December 26, 2021.

THE PRESENTATION

She did not depart from the temple worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day. Luke 2:37

Today we continue our focus on the core stories associated with Jesus coming into the world. The story for today is called *The Presentation*. Mary and Joseph take their baby to the temple to offer sacrifices as was the custom of the day.

While they are in the temple they meet two older people. One was Simeon and the other was Anna. This morning I would like to introduce you to Anna and Simeon.

Simeon was an old man who lived his life with faith that God would send a messiah. He was very devout and spent much of his time at the temple. So, he was present when Mary and Joseph entered the temple and he blessed the baby.

Anna was also present at the temple when Mary and Joseph brought the infant Jesus to be circumcised and dedicated. We know only a little about Anna's life. The little we do know leads us to believe that it was not an easy life. We are told that she spent most of her 84 years as a widow. This would have meant that she was poor. In the society of her day, a widow lost her economic and social place in her society. The life of a woman widowed early in life was usually a difficult one.

This difficult life could have made Anna a bitter hopeless woman. Yet she appears to have continued to be a woman of faith who was open to God's love. The secret of her character is found in our text for today. **She did not depart from the temple.** Anna put worship at the center of her life. Anna and Simeon made a habit of worship.

In one of his works on ethics, Aristotle tells us: **We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.** It was Anna and Simeon's habit of worship that shaped their lives.

When I use the expression, the habit of worship, it may sound like a burden or obligation. We can almost hear an authority figure from our childhood telling us that we have to go to church. Yet regular worship can help to give meaning to our lives. Regular worship can do several things for us.

First the habit of worship makes a place for God in our lives. It is very easy for us to shut God out of our consciousness. We can easily begin to see ourselves as being in control of everything. It is easy for us to get so busy with all the activities of life that we just do not have time for God.

When we get up Sunday after Sunday and come to worship, we reinforce in our minds and souls the truth that God is important to us. Jesus has a place in our lives.

Each week when we make the effort to come to worship we unconsciously remind ourselves of the importance of God in our lives.

One Sunday morning in February, when I was five years old, we woke up to find that three feet of snow covered the ground. I thought that this might be a great morning to stay in bed or go outside with my sled. Those expectations were quickly dashed. My mother made breakfast and we dressed and bundled up in warm coats and boots. We then walked to Church which was about a mile away. The snow was so deep my father had to carry my sister on his shoulders. When we got to Church there was only one other family who came.

The Minister, Mr. Cartmell held a very short service. I do not remember anything about that service, but the journey through the snow taught me how important worship was for my parents. When we take the time and energy to regularly attend worship we witness to the importance of Jesus in our lives.

Secondly the habit of worship also helps to shape our minds. Worship can help to shape how we think and what we believe and how we pray. Many of the elements of our worship service are repeated week after week. We confess our sins, we sing the Doxology, we pray and hear the readings from the Scripture. The mere fact that we repeat these parts of the service week after week can mold how we think and what we believe.

I may have shared with you before the story of Krista. She was a six-year-old girl in the Church I served in Attica. This congregation included the kyrie eleison in the confessional part of the service just as we do, although with different music. Krista's mother told me that one day she came out of her house and saw her six-year-old on the swing. Krista was swinging back and forth on her swing, singing at the top of her lungs, Lord have mercy upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us.

Krista was in worship every week. She had absorbed part of the liturgy. I believe that these words were beginning to shape what she thought and believed about God.

I believe that the same is true for you and me. When we participate in worship regularly, the service begins to shape how we pray and how we think about God and even how we perceive reality itself. The prayers, the singing, the Scriptures and the Sermon all work together in shaping our understanding.

Thirdly, the habit of worship also gives us encouragement in our faith. Worship is the gathering of the faithful before God. It is not easy to be a follower of Jesus. We face temptation every day of our lives. We are plagued by doubts, we wonder why there is suffering; we sometimes question the meaning of our faith. We also know many people in our culture who reject God.

We need the help and encouragement of fellow Christians. There are times when we can believe that we are the only Christians in the world. We wonder if anyone else prays. Thus, it is helpful for us to come and share in worship. When we see a fellow

engineer worshiping God, or the woman from the health club praying or another kid from our school going up for the children's sermon it gives encouragement to our faith. There is no doubt that there is strength in numbers.

So, as we come together to worship, we come to pray for each other, bear one another's burdens and encourage each other in faithfulness.

Fourthly, the habit of worship helps us to hear more of God's word. The central focus of our worship is the Bible. In almost every worship service there is a reading from both the Old Testament and New Testament.

Those who only come on Christmas and Easter miss so much of what God has to say. If you are in worship all the Sunday's of the year the entire story of salvation is retold, from creation to the birth of Jesus to his resurrection to the growth of the early Church.

Many of us do not read as much Scripture in our homes as we would like, but the habit of worship exposes us to all that God promises us.

Finally, the greatest gift from the habit of worship is contact with God. All the things I have talked about before are important for us. Yet the primary reason you and I should come to worship is to experience the presence of God.

We human beings have been created with a need for God. One modern writer said:

There is emptiness at our core that is like a Black Hole in space. A Black Hole sucks down all matter, and there is an emptiness in us which threatens to suck us down as well, although what it is actually doing is dispelling an illusion. It is not destroying us, but revealing to us that we are already a dead thing trying to give itself life by taking in all within its reach. But the core of us remains emptiness. To be a person, a soul, is to need something beyond oneself to live; whatever we can grasp cannot give us life. No matter what efforts we make to fill ourselves, we always find ourselves once again empty. We carry that emptiness and that deadness within us.

You and I need something which this world cannot give to us. What we need is the love of God. We crave his presence in our lives. Because Simeon and Anna were at the temple, they were able to meet God in the infant Jesus. So, you and I come seeking to know Jesus. Jesus has promised us that where two or more are gathered in his name he would be in their midst. So, we come to worship and time and time again, without our always being clear why, we find that Jesus' words attract us. We find ourselves hearing again, perhaps for the hundredth time, something which Jesus did or said and this time for some reason it speaks to us and nourishes us. The institutional church has to be a place where this possibility may be actualized again and again. This is another way of saying that the primary function of the church is worship.

The writer Gordon Dahl made an interesting observation when he wrote:

"Most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, to work at their play, and to play at their worship. As a result, their meaning and values are distorted. Their relationships disintegrate faster than they can keep them in repair and their lifestyles resemble a cast of characters in search of a plot."

He believes that for most of us work is the central concern in our lives. Secondly, we put a lot of energy and effort in recreation and we just play at worship, if we even fit it in.

Anna and Simeon remind us that from the very beginning, from the disciples in first century Jerusalem to Clarence in 2021 gathering for public worship has been understood as a core habit for Christians. It is the practice to gather on the day of resurrection with fellow believers to worship God. Christian leaders and teachers have always believed that worship is important and instructed fellow Christians to be more faithful in attendance and invited others to join in the worship of God.

Christ is heavenly food. Those who know a true hunger for divine love can be fed by worship. Anna and Simeon made a habit of worship. It was because they were in the Temple that they meet Jesus. May our worship again and again help us to experience the Risen Lord.

This Friday we will ring in a new year. It is a time that people often make resolutions. Many of the resolutions involve changing habits. Recall again the words of Aristotle – **We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then, is not an act, but a habit.**

In this New Year, may we resolve to be more faithful in worship. May we join in each week in person or virtually – to pray, sing God's praises and listen for his word. The Habit of Corporate Worship centers our lives and infuses them with purpose. May we learn the truth that caused Anna Simeon to know joy. The truth they teach us are found in the words ***She did not depart from the temple worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.***