



SERMON 826

Feast of the Presentation

Sunday, February 2, 2014

931st Week as Priest

757th Week at St Dunstan's

22nd Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

WE WILL WORSHIP THE LORD

Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Are you aware of what an important day it is today?

I know. Many of you are thinking that, of course, it's Super Bowl Sunday. And maybe a few are aware that it's Groundhog Day. But that's not what I mean. Today is the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple.

It is one of the Feasts of Our Lord in the Church Year. Today we recall the commandment from the Book of Exodus that every firstborn son had to be dedicated to God in memory of the Israelites' deliverance from Egypt, when the firstborn sons of the Egyptians died and those of Israel were spared. It is also the day we remember the eight-day-old child Jesus was presented to the priest at the Temple in Jerusalem. His "first time to go to church," so to speak—which reminds me of the first time I ever went to an Episcopal Church.

I remember the first time I ever walked into an Episcopal church, like it was last week. It was in late 1976, and Leigh took me to a wedding on our second date. I was less than enthusiastic about going to church, any church, but I was eager to go anywhere with her!

We walked into the nave of Church of the Holy Comforter in Montgomery, and I fell in love—with the carved wood, the brass and silver, the stained glass, the people in the pews, the music, the liturgy, the sights and smells and sounds, the bride and groom, the priest celebrating the marriage, and the redheaded girl who brought me. I fell in love with the Episcopal Church, and I remain so to this day. In fact, I am more fully devoted and dedicated to our Church than ever.

But I also recognize the danger therein. Episcopalians can become so enamored of the outward and visible signs (wood, water, brass, brick, and stone) that we lose sight of the inward and spiritual meaning of our being here. Joshua told his own people Israel, “Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”

Idolatry, of any and every kind, is the single most common sin named in the Old Testament. And idolatry is the worship of an object as if it were a god. It’s an old problem, but it’s as common today as it ever was. Some people worship money, or fame. And some people worship their reputation, their physical appearance, or their personal achievements. Wayne Flynt, professor emeritus of history at Auburn, and an ordained Baptist minister, says we have a new trinity in the 21st Century: not the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but the gods of

narcissism, materialism, and hedonism. And then he adds a possible fourth—college football.

I suppose that we are rightly criticized from time to time for loving the Episcopal Church too much. We worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, with a four-centuries-old liturgy. Most of our hymn tunes, preludes, and postludes are from the 17th and 18th centuries—from composers such as Buxtehude, Beethoven, and Bach. The formative architecture of our churches is gothic, dating back to the medieval age. And the vestments we wear? They are as ancient in design as anything about us. We love the tradition of our Church. And the language, the art and poetry of it all, the Sacraments, the form of our praises and the shape our prayers to God.

So we can be guilty of religious idolatry ourselves. We can let the form and outward appearance of worship, the material things of the church, the customs and traditions and practices—become more important than our worship of Christ in the Temple.

One of the strongest reactions to religious idolatry came in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century. And today, the austerity and plainness of many church buildings in the protestant tradition is a direct reflection of that. No brass, no silver. No brilliant colors in vestments and altar flowers. No cross. No stained glass. No icons. Nothing to move the believer's attention from Jehovah, the LORD God, YHWH, the Jealous God of the Desert. Nothing between your fragile being and the harsh judgment of God—but the Blood of Jesus Christ—and nothing to save your immortal soul but the One, Perfect Sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the Cross. Guilt, blame, and fear are communicated in sight, and sound, and silence.

And even the simplicity and starkness of such worship can become a kind of idol—rather than the God of All Creation. Yes, the puritans among us can make their own religious piety a kind of idol.

But an even more common kind of idolatry these days is when we turn the church into a social club or an entertainment center. You may have seen one: it looks like a shopping center or multiplex cinema. They serve Starbucks coffee and show the service on a high-definition widescreen overhead. The music is soft rock, the preacher wears a Polo shirt and a remote microphone, and he promises you that God will bless you and make you rich. Plus, you can get baptized as many times as you like—just schedule that on your iPad right now! More idolatry, just a different look and feel and sound, but idolatry nonetheless.

This feast day, the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, is important to observe on many levels. First, even Episcopalians typically don't know what it's about. Second, it is here to remind us of "true worship," that which is prayer and praise for God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And last, to warn us all that the idols of narcissism, materialism, and hedonism are always crouching at the tent flap, always around us in the ordinary world, and even waiting for us at the church door. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD God—and no other. **AMEN.**

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