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12/31/23, Luke 2:22-40

“The Presentation of Jesus”

This morning I want to offer a few thoughts on the importance and power of ritual. Have you ever paused to think about the different rituals we undertake and why we do them? There’s the blowing out of the candles on the birthday cake, the exchange of rings at a wedding, blowing on dice before throwing them at the casino (I know where you’ve been), a prayer before a meal. Athletes have their touchdown celebrations or pointing up to heaven after a homerun.

Tonight, long after I’ve tucked myself into bed, the ball will drop in Times Square. It’s an annual ritual, a tradition no more important than the annual Blueberry Drop that will take place in Kennebunk tonight when a brightly lit wild Maine blueberry ball will drop from the belltower of the Unitarian Universalist church. That will be an entry the book I’m writing titled: Only in Maine.

There’s a paradox about ritual. We feel like we need to engage in them, but we have trouble even articulating why that is. During the height of the pandemic, this thing started happening where, in lieu of having a birthday party, the birthday boy or girl would stand out in the front yard and a caravan of decorated cars would drive by, with people beeping horns, and waving.

At a time when we could not engage in our normal rituals and ceremonies, we created new ones. That’s how important they are to us. I realized this in my first year of parish ministry. My first winter up in Wayne Maine there was an ice storm that crippled the entire mid Maine region.

I was without power for 13 days. The most difficult part of it was not all the most obvious challenges that come from not having power in the winter. I started feeling disoriented, because I lost my daily routine. I no longer had the little habits and things I did ritualistically that kept me on track.

Admittedly, I’m biased, but I’m concerned that with the decline of organized religion, a lot of important rituals and ceremonies that once shaped us as people, and served as guideposts, and united us are becoming less and less a part of life. We’ve already lost Sabbath observance. Don’t get me going on that. It’s ritual and ceremony that help us recognize the sacredness of life and the presence of God in the everyday.

I'm struck that even the holy family observed the traditional rituals and ceremonies. In the first two chapters of Luke, we find extraordinary announcements and revelations. The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and announced, as a result of the action of nothing less than the Holy Spirit, she would have a child.

An angel appeared to the shepherds as they watched their flocks by night and announced: "To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Then, suddenly, with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host began praising God.

After Luke's marvelous description of the birth of Jesus, the shepherds made their visit and returned to their fields praising God for all they had heard and seen. What's the very next thing Luke tells us? "After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child."

I find this interesting. This child was the product of the Holy Spirit. The Messiah, for whom generations of Hebrew people have been waiting, finally arrived. The one Christians today refer to as the Son of God entered into the world and he was subject to the same rituals and traditions as any Hebrew child.

Not only was he circumcised after 8 days, there were two further acts required of devout parents: the redemption of the firstborn and the purification of the mother. In those days, the firstborn child was consecrated to God. The firstborn male was to be redeemed, or bought back, for a price.

The other ritual prescribed by the law was the purification of the mother. After the birth of a male child, the mother was ceremonially unclean for a period of 40 days. After the 40 days, she was to go to the Temple and offer a lamb and a pigeon or turtledove. If she could not afford a lamb, she could offer instead two turtledoves or pigeons.

I think this story says something about the power and the importance of ritual. Mary was impregnated by the Holy Spirit. She gave birth to the Messiah, the Savior of the world. But when she went to the Temple, they told her, "Yeah, but you still owe us two turtledoves... that's the tradition." Even the holy family engaged in the ceremonies and rituals prescribed by the law for every Jewish family. Therefore, they must be really important.

This topic came up in our Advent Devotional discussion last week. We were talking about our different family traditions relating to Christmas. In my family, we had a ritual of opening one present on Christmas Eve. That's pretty common. However, we had one other tradition that developed. Nobody could open anything, no stockings or gifts under the tree, until my parents had coffee in hand.

In our conversation last week, Allen Norris reminded us about the book Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer. We read it during this past season of Lent. In the book, she describes three purposes or benefits to ceremony or ritual. She's not a Christian. She's a scientist and a member of the Potawatomi Nation, but everything she names are things we see in our reading today.

The first is that they are vehicles for belonging. When Jesus was circumcised, he was also officially given his name. Both circumcision and naming gave the child an identity. It was an act of blessing, and a sign of belonging to the family and to the community.

For us, baptism does the same thing. Baptism is a ceremony or a ritual marking entry into the body of Christ. It says to the baptized or the family of the baptized, "you belong." "You're loved. You're part of something really important."

The second point made by Robin Wall Kimmerer is that the power of ritual is that it marries the mundane to the sacred. That's very similar to what we say about Holy Communion. We take ordinary wheat and grapes, we pray over them, and they become sacred to us. The act of sharing the bread and the cup becomes a holy moment, infused with the divine.

Rituals are vehicles for belonging. They unite the mundane and the sacred. The third point made by Robin Wall Kimmerer is that rituals and ceremonies provide a situation where people communicate seriously. By far, my favorite part of the wedding ceremony is when the two people face one another and exchange vows. Those promises made back and forth are really important words.

I'm moved every time I preside at a military funeral and the surviving spouse is presented with a flag. There's the very reverent folding of the flag and when it is presented, important words are spoken: "On behalf of the President of the United States, the particular branch of the services, and a grateful Nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved one's honorable and faithful service."

Rituals and ceremonies are opportunities for people to communicate seriously. That's exactly what happens in our text today. Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the Temple, for the customary rituals, and there was Simeon. All we know about him is that he was righteous, devout and the Holy Spirit rested on him. He took Jesus in his arms and spoke a blessing over him, declaring who he was and what he was destined to do.

Rituals are vehicles for belonging. They unite the mundane and the divine. And they are opportunities for important communication. That's why we have so many of them around the church and why we do the same things, year after year. Not only do they help us to recognize the sacredness of life and the presence of God in the every day, but in a world of constant change and flux, rituals orient us and ground us in the familiar.

So, all I'm suggesting today is for us to think about how we use ritual to mark endings and beginnings, and to give our love for others voice, and to shape our relationships. What are the rituals you can implement in your life to recognize the sacredness of special moments or to communicate to others that they are included and valued? Maybe it's praying before meals, or an annual family reunion, or a special way to greet a grandchild.

I've moved around a lot in my life, and prior to my leaving the church I was serving, some members of the church had a going away party. There was some wine being consumed and lots of conversations happening.

Suddenly, someone hushed the crowd and said he'd like to make a toast. He raised a glass and proceeded to say some really touching and loving things. I never knew what an impact the simple ritual of offering a toast could make. We're here to bless one another.

Mary and Joseph underwent the usual rituals. In doing so, they received an amazing blessing!