

February 2, 2025,
The fourth Sunday after Epiphany, The Presentation of our Lord,
at St. Michael's Church
The Reverend Joshua Wong

Focus: Who are the holy women and men in your life?

Function: I am preaching this message to encourage us to be holy men and women, who affects change to the world.

Let us pray:

O God, source of all light, today you revealed to the aged Simeon and Anna your light which enlightens the nations. Fill our hearts with the light of faith, that we who bear these candles may walk in the path of goodness, through Jesus Christ the Light of the World. Amen.

Please be seated.

Today is the fourth Sunday after The Epiphany, but the church also calls this a feast day, known by various names. It is called Candlemas, also known as the Feast of the Presentation of Lord Jesus, the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or the Feast of the Holy Encounter. Based on the account in our Gospel reading today, primarily, this is a feast day, a celebration day, to commemorate the presentation of Jesus at the Temple by his parents, Joseph and Mary.

According to Jewish law, a first-born son must be circumcised after eight days and later presented in the Temple and be redeemed by an offering to God. The Old Testament rules in Leviticus 12, require the mother to be

purified by presenting a lamb as a burnt offering, and either a young pigeon or dove as sin offering 33 days after a boys circumcision. Hence, that is where we get the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Since the 4th century A.D., our church calendar celebrates Candlemas on February 2, which happens to be today. We will focus on the readings of the Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ at the temple, instead of the one found in the fourth Sunday after Epiphany.

Candlemas marks the return of light, a symbol of protection and prosperity. On Candlemas, many Christians, especially Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and some mainline Protestant denominations including Lutherans, Anglicans and Methodists, also take their candles to their local church, where they are blessed and then used for the rest of the year.

Candlemas Day is one of the oldest, celebrated feast days in Jerusalem. A woman of that time name Egeria is credited with writing a detailed account of an extended pilgrimage to the Holy Land, described the Candlemas celebrations there: She said, "...all things are done in order with great joy, just as at Easter. All the priests preach, and also the bishop, always treating of that passage of the Gospel where, on the fortieth day, Joseph and Mary

brought the Lord into the Temple, and Simeon and Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, saw Him, and of the words which they said when they saw the Lord, and of the offerings which the parents presented.”

Leading us to today’s Gospel reading.

When I read this joyous passage, I could not ignore the 2 main characters at the temple. Anna and Simeon were a holy woman and a man who lived at the temple waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The prophetess Anna and Simeon, a man that is quoted as “Righteous and Devout,” reminded me of the countless holy women and men who have gone before us and who surround us today, serving people and doing God’s work at churches and in our society. Who are the Holy women and men in your life? They may have been your parents, be warriors defending justice, or parents raising their children in the knowledge of God. They may be altar guild laity in every church who steadfastly serve to make church possible for all of us. Holy men and women may be teachers in our schools and seminaries, they may be in hospitals, or serve in soup kitchens, and in our story today, they were people like Anna and Simeon who were prophets speaking on behalf of God. All these people shine God’s light which enlightens the world.

Yesterday was a very special day in my life. One that is both sacred and unforgettable. There were many of my holy women and men in attendance. I am amazed at how the Lord has led me to this moment. There were many holy men and women in my life, but especially two that is worth mentioning today.

The first was my father, who passed away before my calling to ministry. I was never that “problem child” that someone in history coined for a Preacher’s kid. But maybe I was. I was no ordinary child, the youngest of five, the artistic one that was the first to do many things in my family. The first to be accepted at Art Center, one of the nation’s premier art schools located in Pasadena. Art Center rarely accepted students directly from high school. I was the first in my family to explore the world abroad, and even the first to timidly take a public bus from Highland Park on an early Saturday morning to shop in the intimidating stores in Beverly Hills. I was the first to leave my father’s church to find my identity, and the first to work in the Advertising hallways of Madison Avenue, and the first to work in the garment district in New York City with Ralph Lauren. And, oh yes, the first to come out gay. So, maybe to my parents, I was that “problem child.” At least, I was never a boring child. I was definitely not someone who lived a typical life, but somehow, through my sometimes difficult spiritual journey,

my faith remained, largely due to having a fun and relatable father who believed that God made me this way.

Throughout my priestly discernment process, many people asked me what I thought my father would say if he was still alive? I think he would be very proud that I followed God's calling. I know he would be proud of me, because he knew me, he knew who I was. He was like Simeon and Anna, who knew deep down that baby Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. That's the amazing thing about holy men and women, they see what God sees, and they act upon it.

Another saintly person that comes to mind is my high school college advisor, Jack Wright from Franklin High School in 1977. Franklin is part of the LA Unified School District, located in a lower income, primarily Mexican American neighborhood in Northeast LA known as Highland Park. Now it's gentrified, with New York bagels and coffee bars, but, it's still a neighborhood that you can see low riders, gangs and cholos. The schools in Highland Park are still poorly funded. Because our school could not afford uniforms, I remember, my sister Grace had to sew her own tennis outfit the night before her competition against ritzy Woodland Hills High school. Because she was so tired from sewing, she lost the game. Our art classes did

not have financial means to even afford art supplies. One time, my art teacher had to use the outer transparent skin of an onion as tracing paper. But Mr. Wright saw past the difficulties that prohibited low income students from going to college. He made it a mission that whoever has the grades and gets accepted into any college, he will get the student money to attend. Today, I am still in touch with him. Mr. Wright's dedication and determination was known in Sacramento and earned him many accolades and articles in newspapers for the work he has done to change the landscape of low income student's lives. Hence, in every graduating class, many of us proudly marched on stage to accept our diplomas at which time teachers announced where we were heading to college. Those who were accepted into Ivy League schools headed to the East coast, out of their circle of poverty into a new world. Today, there is a scholarship in his name, and this year disbursed nearly \$200,000 to Franklin students going to college. Mr. Wright is very happy to know that I am now a priest, and he himself is actively serving in his Methodist parish in La Canada. Because of Mr. Wright's work, today there are many influential Mexican American doctors, lawyers and politicians serving in the greater LA area. They all remember how Mr Wright was their ticket to a new life. In my senior year, when I was accepted to Art Center, he found a full scholarship so that I could attend. He proudly tells fellow teachers that, as of today, I am the only graduate to

attend Art Center. He reminded me that he still has a series of drawings I gave him which he hangs on his kitchen by the light switch. He tells me that every morning, when he turns on the light, he thinks about me.

Yesterday was an emotional day for me. And thank you for all you did for me that day. I am reminded of God's intentional work in leading me to where I am today in ministry. It was only seven years ago that my priest, Jon Dephouse asked me during dinner if I ever thought of being in the ministry. If only had he known that the Holy Spirit was already nudging me to that question, which began the whole discernment process. Many of the people that were here yesterday played the role of Anna and Simeon in my life.

If you asked me ten years ago what I thought I would be doing at my age, I would have still thought I'd be designing shoes. I was happy with my life, from Advertising to shoes, but apparently God had other plans for me, Now I can say, "I went from Soles to Souls." This story is an example of how God can work in your life if you are open to it.

Which brings me to where God has led me to right now, St. Michael's. After my ordination as a deacon, I started looking for a job at our diocese job

board. Edward and I started visiting churches that had job openings. On one of these visits, we came to St. Michael's, and my first impression was the potential of this charming cute church. I had a good impression of El Segundo, but knew that St. Michael's was looking for a Rector and I was looking for an Associate job. Surprisingly, the following day, the Rev. Tom Discavage, who is in charge of transitional ministry, called me up and said, "Joshua, have you considered St. Michael's in El Segundo? I didn't tell him I was just there, and he said, "I encourage you to apply for the role."

The process was easy and smooth, thanks to your search committee headed by Jorge Cortes, Melissa McCaverty and Michelle Gillam. They were very professional and kept their promises during each step of the process. I met with the vestry after I was ordained as a priest the following January and enjoyed the interview. At that time, I was close to three other offers, but this is the one that I felt was the right place to be. Why? Because of heart and potential.

I can sense a heart here at St. Michaels, a heart that cares for God's church. There is potential here, because even after the difficult time with COVID and being without a priest, you all continued to believe in this church.

I believe the church belongs to God, every parishioner here belongs to God, the children and parents at the Children's Center belong to God, and our future belongs to God. We are asked to be faithful and to be led by the Holy Spirit to do our part— bring the message of Jesus Christ to a hurting world who needs to know they are beloved. And I am here to guide you on your journey of faith. I pray that we will personally be challenged by the Holy Spirit to grow in knowledge and faith. I pray that God will give us a creative vision to be a new way of being church in a new world.

Today, as we celebrate the feast of “Candlemas,” you might wonder if this ancient celebration is still relevant. Indeed, more than ever, our world needs us to be “a light in the world.”

May St. Michael's and the Children's Center be a beacon of light in El Segundo and beyond, and we become the holy women and men that brings light and change to the lives of all we encounter. May we continue to be the Simeons and Annas of the world.

Amen.