

BUT DID YOU SEE JESUS?

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The Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple
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Simeon praised God, saying, “My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all people, to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of your people Israel.” (Luke 2:30-32)

One of the great questions of human existence is whether or not we are alone in the universe. Surely, we reason, somewhere in all the vast expanse of interstellar space other intelligent life must exist. Yet the sobering truth is, we've never observed a single bit of reliable evidence for extraterrestrial beings. Why not? Last month I read an online article that attempts to provide an answer. It is entitled, *Alien life is out there, but our theories are probably steering us away from it.*¹ The author of the article is Peter Vickers, a Philosophy of Science professor at Durham University in England. The point he makes is that we are so distracted by what we think biological signatures should be, that even with all our interplanetary probes, rovers, and telescopes, we're likely missing the traces of other genuine life forms.

To support his theory, Vickers has embedded in the article a video entitled, *Selective Attention Test*. The video features six people and two basketballs. Three players wear white shirts, and three wear black shirts. When you click play, an announcer instructs you to count how many times the players in white pass the basketball. Forty seconds later when the action stops, the announcer asks, “How many passes did you count?” My answer was a confident fourteen. You see, I am more observant than most, and I used to play basketball. Maybe so, but nope. Wrong. The correct answer is fifteen passes, declares the announcer. Oops, I missed one. Then the announcer goes on: “But did you see the gorilla?” I was confused. A gorilla? What? The video automatically rewinds, and sure enough, a person in a gorilla costume strolls into the chaos of six people passing basketballs, turns and faces the camera, thumps his chest, and saunters offstage. I completely missed it. Sad to say, we could have strange visitors from another planet visiting our annual meeting today, and you'd better not count on me to notice.

Those of you who were here last week on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany might confidently declare that today would be called the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany. Nope. Wrong. Today is a day on the calendar that goes by many names, but Epiphany IV isn't one of them. Your challenge now will be to count how many times this guy dressed in white and black passes the basketball. Outside the church February 2nd is affectionately known as Ground Hog's Day. At some point today in Punxsutawney, PA, the town officials will drag an unwilling rodent out of his hole to see if he casts a shadow. If he does, superstition says we're in for a lot more winter – not that we've had much winter anyway. No shadow means winter is just about over – not that it ever really began.

Inside the church, today is a major feast day of the Christian year. The official name used to be *The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary*. In the Book of Leviticus (12:1-8), Jewish law states that a woman was ritually unclean for forty days after the birth of a male child. It was decreed, therefore, that she should present herself at the Temple to make a sacrifice, and then presto: she would be clean. Since February 2nd is forty days after Christmas, this would be the day of Mary's purification that Luke describes. And so it was that for many centuries the church kept this day, calling it *The Purification of Mary*.

Luke also alludes to another custom of the Jews: that first born sons be brought to the Temple, presented to a priest, and dedicated into a lifetime of service to God at the Temple.

Presenting the child was the Jewish way of thanking God for rescuing them at the Red Sea in ancient times. If the parents didn't literally want to leave their son at the Temple to be in God's service – as most surely did not – they could make an offering to redeem him from a life of Temple responsibility. So in keeping with the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the Temple, and redeemed him with a small offering of money. This also happened on the fortieth day, and because Christian high holy days are more appropriately focused on Jesus rather than anyone else, nowadays the feast is called *The Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple*.

Luke tells us that while they were at the Temple an old man named Simeon took Jesus in his arms, recognized that the baby was God's promised Messiah, and declared that he would be *a light to enlighten the Gentiles*. Because Simeon was apparently the first to call Jesus a "light," Christians from earliest times have blessed and carried candles on February 2nd, and have also called the day *Candlemas*. So how many times did I pass the ball? Let's review: today is February 2nd, Ground Hog's Day, The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, The Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple, and Candlemas. The correct answer is five. Hold on, it's also Super Bowl Sunday and the day of our annual meeting, so we are now up to seven. But did you see the gorilla? Did you see Jesus? In all our doings today – singing, praying, receiving the sacrament, tending to the organizational life of the church – will you see Jesus?

It seems to me that old Simeon and the prophetess Anna have something important to teach us. When God's promised Messiah moved through the bustle of the Temple, they both had the eyes to recognize their salvation in an ordinary child, presented by an ordinary family. Who were these two? We really don't know much about them. It could be that Simeon was a priest of the Temple who offered sacrifices to God. We know a little more about Anna. She was at least 84 years old. As a young woman, after only seven years of marriage, she was widowed. So from that time until we meet her in today's reading – probably 60 or more years later – she had devoted herself to being at the Temple night and day: fasting, praying, and encouraging all who came there looking for the redemption of Israel. The point is, they both saw Jesus on this day, and recognized him for who he was.

How hard it can be for us to see Jesus! How hard it can be to recognize the Lord's living presence in our midst. When the world becomes more violent and vulgar, and people more discouraged and disillusioned with each passing month, how hard it is to see the love of God in our midst. When the weak and vulnerable endure abuse and neglect, when loved ones suffer and die, when life seems to be just one meaningless thing after another, how hard it is to see Jesus presented to us. When I was growing up, my father was the rector of several different churches over the years. We only had one car, so frequently my brothers and I would be stranded at the church waiting for Dad to finish some meeting and drive us home. To pass the time we'd go exploring and came to know every nook and cranny of the buildings. In one church I remember the pulpit. Carved into the podium, for only the eyes of the preacher, was a quote from John's Gospel (12:21): *Sir, we would see Jesus*. The inscription was meant to be a plea from every congregation who would ever sit in those pews. *Show us Jesus, please*. I remember thinking to myself, "Wow. That sounds way too hard. I'm glad that my destiny is to become a professional baseball player and not a preacher."

How can we see Jesus? Perhaps looking to the Scriptures will help. Perhaps by looking to Simeon and Anna, and Mary and Joseph in today's reading from Luke we can train our eyes to see God's salvation prepared before the face of all people. One thing I note is how anchored they all were in the law of the Lord. The traditions and rituals their people celebrated kept them focused there. They were spiritual *and* religious. I'm struck by how many times Luke notes that Mary and Joseph were acting out "everything required by the law of the Lord." It was within the framework of their faith that their eyes came to see Lord's presence in the otherwise ordinary events of life.

A second observation in Luke is the concept of waiting. We don't like waiting. We prefer to be in control and make things happen – be those things the resolution of our problems or the

attainment of our goals. We like to plan our work, and work our plan. Waiting is passive and weak. We'd prefer to be active and strong. But every so often you stand before some reality you can't control through action and strength. God would be one of those realities. The appearing of Jesus would be one of those realities. We learn to see the Lord's presence with us by waiting with patience. Simeon and Anna had waited for decades to see God's salvation, and we can suppose that they would have kept on waiting. For them – for many – spiritual insight and perspective is a blessing that comes only with patience. Why should we wait for God? The answer is: God comes to those who wait.

Finally, we might take note of Simeon and Anna's hope and faith. These two didn't spend all those years at the Temple despairing that God would never appear. No, they expected God to fulfill the word spoken through the prophets. They trusted that God would come through, no matter how long their wait would be. Perhaps if we hit pause on panic, and practiced instead a measure of Simeon and Anna's hope and faith, we too would see Jesus, even today, receiving him as we will in bread and wine. When you come forward to Communion rail, and kneel there lost in wonder, love, and praise, will you see Jesus come strolling across the sanctuary, pause that altar, and beat his chest? Probably not – although I did consider hiring an actor to do just that! Rather, we see Jesus by the power of his Spirit in the ordinary faces of each other.

A story is told by the late M. Scott Peck in his book, The Different Drum. A once great monastery had dwindled down to just five elderly monks: the Abbott and four others. On the grounds of the monastery was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used as a prayer retreat. One day the Abbott decided to visit the rabbi there and ask for any advice on how to save the monastery. The rabbi welcomed the Abbott and commiserated. "I know how it is," he said. "The spirit has gone out of people. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old rabbi and the old Abbott read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came for the Abbott to leave. He embraced the rabbi and said, "Is there no piece of advice you can give that would help me save my dying order?" "No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the other monks heard what the rabbi had said, they were perplexed. "He must have meant the Abbott," they said, "for he is our leader. But on the other hand, Brother Thomas is certainly a holy man. Perhaps he is the Messiah. Brother Elrod is too crotchety, but then again he is often very right about things and people. Brother Philip is too passive, but he's always there when you need him. Of course he didn't mean me. Yet supposing he did? Oh, God; I couldn't mean that much for thee."

As they wondered and contemplated in this manner, what happened was the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect, on the off chance that one of them might be the Messiah. And on the off-off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect. Soon a new aura of love and holiness permeated the five old monks and their monastery. People who picnicked in the forest and wandered along its paths began to notice. They visited more often, they brought their friends, who brought their friends. More and more they began talking with the old monks. After a while one visitor asked if he might join. Then another, and another. Within a few years the monastery was once again a thriving order, all because five old monks had a theory that the Messiah was among them. Do you know what? They were right. It was Jesus. He was there.

My prayer for the people of Grace Church is that we have such eyes to see Jesus, and to recognize and rejoice in the Lord's presence, so that the song of Simeon can be ours as well: "*My eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared before the face of all people.*"

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¹ <https://theconversation.com/alien-life-is-out-there-but-our-theories-are-probably-steering-us-away-from-it-124042>