

## ROOTED IN RITUAL

Psalm 148; Luke 2: 21-38

First Sunday after Christmas • December 29, 2024

By Pat Berger

It was so excellent that Bill signed up to be the liturgist for today. With all of those exclamation points in our reading that he did from the Psalms, we needed his voice, or one like it, to read it properly. Thank you, Bill!

One of the commentators wrote that this Psalm had an “aggressive” number of exclamation points --11 of them in just 14 verses, in the NRSV version from which we are reading today. This particular commentator checked some different versions, and found that the King James version has no exclamation points at all, although the New King James version has six. And the Common English Bible has 18! (He says it is exhausting to read!) Or, while we are in the middle of Pastor Peter’s current sermon series, we might say it might be wearying to read . . .

The Psalms were an important part of faith ritual for the Hebrew people at that time. Reading them was a large part of their worship time together. I don’t know what they knew about exclamation points, if anything, but it is hard to imagine reading what Bill just read for us without them.

Our reading from Luke, at least in the NRSV, has no exclamation points – at least, not the kind that one can see . . . Mary and Joseph had Jesus circumcised on the eighth day, another ritual part of what faithful Jews of that day did. On that occasion, he was called Jesus, as the angel had named him before he was conceived. Our next paragraph tells of another ritual: purification. They brought him up to

Jerusalem and presented him to the Lord – that was the ritual for first-born male children – and they offered a sacrifice. And we might expect a response not unlike what was written in Psalm 148! Maybe even an exhausting number of exclamation points, if all in attendance had had any idea who this baby was. Simeon, clearly, knew who Jesus was. When he came into the temple and saw the baby in Mary's arms, he knew who it was, and took the baby and praised God (that part must have come with exclamation points!), and then gave Mary and Joseph some thoughts about what might be ahead for them. Knowing what we know, we are not surprised that those words did not come with exclamation points. And Anna came to the temple, too, and it sounds as if her message were a bit more hopeful. She began to praise God, and to tell all who were there about the redemption coming for Jerusalem.

We are a people of ritual, too. Our reading from Luke had Jesus' baptism taking place; my guess is that each of you could think of a baptism that took place in a worship service we attended. Many of us will remember our children's baptisms; some of us may have been baptized at an age such that we can remember our own baptism! I have only baptized one baby – and I am so grateful for that baby and his family; I have had the privilege of baptizing several adults, and each of those services was very special. There is the ritual that is a wedding ceremony. There are the rituals that are memorial services and funerals. There is the ritual that is communion during a worship service. Our sacred rituals root us, they ground us, and help us to go about the rest of our lives.

There are the rituals that are a worship service on any given Sunday. Our order of worship stays pretty much the same from Sunday to Sunday; imagine if you were to come to worship and everything had changed. Perhaps there was only an hour long prayer. Or what if the

pastor said, “Who would like to preach today?” And then when you came back the next week – if you came back the next week – it was altogether different again. And the next week, and the next week. There are people for whom whatever happens is ritual – I don’t happen to be one of those. I like pretty much being able to count on what will happen in a worship service; it helps me to be able to concentrate on the words in the sermon or the words in the hymns or prayers, just knowing where we are headed. Otherwise, it might, indeed, get to be wearying . . .

And it isn’t just in the church where rituals exist and are important. We have just come through Christmas week. How many times have you been asked recently, or been the one who asked, what are your plans for Christmas Eve, or for Christmas morning? Generally, people don’t have to do much thinking about it; they just tell you – oh, first we go here and do this and then we go there and do that, and generally, they are very excited about whatever the plan, the ritual is. Or you hear, well, this year is going to be different because . . . and then you get that story, as perhaps a new ritual is being formed.

Getting back to our reading from Luke, think about how Mary and Joseph may have felt when they heard Simeon’s words as they prepared for the purification ritual for Jesus. He told them that Jesus would be destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and then he told Mary that a sword would pierce her soul. Imagine her trying to summon the courage to be the mother of this holy child. We have times in our lives, too, when things don’t go according to what we have planned. We have rituals upon which we count in those times, and sometimes new rituals arise and sometimes we are pleasantly surprised. Rituals can seem as if they are just there. And yet, rituals are at our roots, and we are rooted in them. Thanks be to God!

Let us pray.