



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### The Presentation

#### The God of Time

[RCL] Malachi 3:1-4; Psalm 84 or Psalm 24:7-10; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

God is the God of time. The readings appointed for this week in the lectionary each give a powerful reminder that God is not an aloof entity who stands above and outside of our world. We worship a God who has actually entered into human history. Even more perplexing and mysterious is the claim these readings make that God continues to enter our story. The season of Epiphany offers an extended meditation upon this remarkable theological claim.

The liturgical cycle begins each year with Advent, that season leading up to the great feast of Christmas. If Advent is a time to express waiting, longing, and hope, Epiphany is a season to reflect on encounters with the divine: those hopes made reality. The past few Sundays have proclaimed the stories of Jesus' baptism, beginning of ministry, and the crowd favorite, turning water into wine. Today is the celebration of the Presentation of our Lord. The passages from Malachi, Hebrews, and the Gospel of Luke each speak a deep truth about God's presence in our world.

The prophetic book of Malachi speaks of God's sudden arrival: "Thus says the Lord, 'See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord who you seek will suddenly come to his temple.'" God's appearance, according to Malachi, will be abrupt. In Luke's account, Mary and Joseph have taken Jesus to the Temple in obedience to the purification laws. When they arrive, the righteous and devout Simeon greets the holy family and declares that he has now seen God's salvation, who will be a light to all people. Simeon also adds that Jesus will be opposed and cause the falling and rising of many.

As if one strange Temple encounter was not enough, Luke continues the story with another. Immediately after Simeon blesses the holy family, the prophet Anna comes. Anna then spoke about Jesus "to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." In other words, the redemption that was hoped and longed for by those present was fulfilled in Jesus.

In the story, Anna and Simeon had been waiting a lifetime to encounter the Messiah. Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he laid his eyes on God's anointed. When Simeon encounters Jesus, he takes him in his arms and declares those words that are known as the *Nunc dimittis*: "Now you are dismissing your servant in peace." The church took these words as early as the 4th century

and incorporated them into evening and night prayers. They remain in Episcopal and Anglican prayerbooks around the world. God is the God of time, and God has chosen to enter into human time. The *Nunc dimittis* reminds us that *now* is the time of the Lord. *Now* is the time of salvation. *Now* is the time for peace.

In a world of increasing political turmoil, polarization, and anxiety, it can be difficult to see where God is present. Looking to the war zones across the globe, it certainly does not seem like the Prince of Peace reigns over this world. Browsing the vitriol on social media on either side of the political aisle does not look like it brings glory to God. The anxiety in young people is almost palpable, exacerbated by things like the climate change crisis, in addition to increasing stress around school, body image, and the economy.

But one of the pronounced lessons in the readings from today is that God does not make an appointment for God's arrival in our lives. As Malachi says, the Lord will suddenly appear in the temple. Even Jesus' own parents were amazed at what Simeon said about him. God appears unexpectedly. God appears in God's own time frame. And God will appear again.

For many, to speak of the arrival of God on earth is to speak of Jesus' triumphant return. Perhaps there will be a rapture or a descent on the clouds on a white horse. Biblical scholars and theologians have wrestled for many centuries over the who, what, when, and where of the second coming. But there is divine presence still among us, even amid the turmoil and anxieties of every present age. And that's what the season of Epiphany is there to remind us: God's kingdom is here in our midst.

The author of Hebrews makes clear that Jesus has fully entered into our world of time and space: "He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect." This is a theological claim that the church has proclaimed since the early councils: Jesus was fully human. Luke's gospel teaches us that part of that humanity was his growth, as the King James translation phrases it, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature." When the church embraces the sudden and unexpected dimensions of God's character, the church, like the Christ child, grows in wisdom and stature.

Many in The Episcopal Church will know the story of women's ordination in our church. In 1974, eleven women presented themselves for ordination to the priesthood. The canons of the church had not yet been changed to explicitly allow women to be ordained as priests. Though a motion in 1973 had majority support, the way votes of diocesan delegations were counted meant that the motion failed. As General Convention happens every three years, this meant that it would be another three years before canon law could be amended to explicitly allow for women's ordination to the priesthood.

By July 1974, eleven women who had already been ordained as deacons presented themselves for ordination to the priesthood at the Church of the Advocate in Philadelphia. Three retired bishops stepped up to ordain these women as priests. Despite threats of violence and all manner of discouragement, these

women were truly prophetic—answering God’s call when the institution and structures around them sought to keep them from full participation in the life of the church.

Many critics at the time—and even today—could not understand why these women and bishops would not wait until the next General Convention. After all, what is three years of waiting compared to a lifetime of ministry? But for these women and bishops, the call of God was *now*. There are times for waiting. And there are times of immediate response to God. In answering God’s call, these women blazed the path for women across the country to embody God’s sacramental presence to those within and outside the church.

The church does not always get everything right. But the church can only grow when individuals and leaders respond to their encounters with God. Sometimes that growth is painful. Often, that growth is met with resistance. Jesus’ growth in wisdom shows his humanity; our growth in the church reflects God’s presence with us. Within the story of scripture and of church history is a message of God moving into the messy reality of human space and time. Epiphany is a season to reflect on these encounters with God, past and present. Encounter with the divine sparks movement. In our world today, there is plenty of room to move for justice, peace, and proclamation of the gospel. As we move in response to our encounters with the divine, may we in turn embody God’s presence to each other.

Amen.

*Michael Toy is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Religious Studies at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington studying digital religion in New Zealand. He also serves as public theologian for the Student Christian Movement Aotearoa.*