The CATHEDRAL of ST. PHILIP
SERVING ATLANTA AND THE WORLD

2/2/2025

God is a Surprise

A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Candlemas Procession and Choral Eucharist
The Feast of the Presentation

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dan Murphy, our Director of Communications, has a painting in his office of Simeon holding the baby Jesus in the Temple. It's done in a loose, impressionistic style—thick oil paints smudged and swirling. When I first saw it, I assumed a teenager had painted it. But over time, I've been surprised by how much it means to me.

It speaks to me of God.

We have that painting because Harry Pritchett gave it to us. Some of you knew Harry. He had been a longtime, beloved rector at All Saints on North Avenue before becoming dean of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City—famous for using circus animals in their St. Francis Day procession. Harry came here after he retired.

Harry was a surprise. He was the most spirited, joy-filled person you can imagine. Just being in his presence was a delight.

Harry died recently—not tragically, but in the fullness of time. His funeral was held at All Saints. The nave was full, which was remarkable given Harry's age. The mood was somber. We had all loved Harry in our own ways—and we were surprised, too, to realize just how many others had known and loved him in theirs.

The somber mood didn't last long, though. Harry had written a song years ago called "God Is a Surprise." Harry's children lead us in singing it as part of the service. There we were, gathered to celebrate Harry's life, singing his song at the top of our lungs. We all knew the words by heart. Each time we got to the refrain, our voices grew louder and louder: "God is a surprise!"

At the end of the service, Harry's family raised parasol umbrellas above their heads and a second line formed to carry Harry's ashes out to the memorial garden.

I'll always remember Harry.

He was right, of course.

God is a surprise.

I imagine Mary and Joseph were surprised, too, when they brought their child to the temple. Anna and Simeon, two old prophets, declared that their baby was the Messiah—the light of the world, the one who would bring glory to Israel.

Now, remember: the Gospels tell us that Mary and Joseph had already been told this would be true. But still, they were amazed. Why? Why were they amazed?

That question reminds me of an old joke.

A man loses his car keys and is searching for them under a streetlight. He's crawling around on all fours when

a woman walks by and asks what he's doing.

"I lost my keys," he says.

"Well, let me help," she offers, and joins him.

After a while, frustrated, she asks, "Where exactly did you lose them?"

"Oh," he says, "over there by the car."

"Then why are we looking here?"

"Because the light's better over here."

God is a surprise.

We are called to be light in the world—not artificial light confined to easy places, but light that ventures into the dark. In the Christian tradition, darkness often represents not evil, but not knowing. Ignorance. Uncertainty. Mystery.

We are called to be light that enters that darkness—light that helps others see what we have had the courage to believe. Not so they'll follow us, but so they'll find God there, in the unknown.

Because God is not on a throne. God is not leading the military. God is not where we expect.

God is a surprise.

God is this baby Jesus, undergoing the ordinary rituals every child did at the temple. But Anna and Simeon had trained their eyes through silence, solitude, and prayer. They had learned how to see. They had learned how to recognize the extraordinary in the ordinary. They saw what others could not.

That's what we're doing here. Through our own practices of silence, solitude, and prayer, we are learning to see—learning to be still enough that the noise of the world fades and we can hear the voice of God.

In solitude, we begin to know who we are—and who we are not.

And in prayer, we come into conversation with God, slowly gaining sight we didn't have before.

One of my favorite examples of this comes from Victor Hugo's Les Misérables. You likely know the story.

Jean Valjean, unjustly imprisoned for 19 years, has been searching for dignity and justice—but always in the wrong places. Everywhere he turns, he finds only punishment, fear, rejection.

Until one day, a bishop welcomes him into his home. He feeds him, gives him shelter, shows him kindness—though he knows Valjean is a fugitive.

And Valjean does the only thing he knows how to do. He steals the bishop's silver.

When the police catch him and drag him back to the bishop's residence, the bishop does something extraordinary.

"Oh," he says, "you forgot something." Then he goes back inside and returns with the two silver candlesticks—the last of his valuables. "I gave these to you, too," he tells Valjean in front of the stunned police.

The bishop had trained himself to see what others could not. He had eyes to recognize not just a thief, but a man who could be redeemed.

God is a surprise.

God shows up in unexpected places, in ways we had not anticipated. But if we've trained our hearts and minds, we'll recognize God when God comes.

Now, I love these big, literary examples. They're beautiful and inspiring. But I don't want you to leave thinking this is only for saints or bishops or characters in novels. That seeing God is only for the exceptional few.

Just this morning, at our earlier service, we celebrated the Boy Scouts. We celebrate a lot of things—it's the Cathedral, after all—but we especially love to celebrate the Scouts.

A young Scout came to the lectern and read the Prayers of the People. And instead of praying for the Anglican Communion, he prayed for the Angelical Communion.

We chuckled.

But then the Dean came out to give the announcements. And he referenced the moment. I grew anxious—worried we were going to highlight a child's mistake. But then the Dean told a story.

He reminded us how the Anglican Communion got its name. Pope Gregory the Great—before he was pope—was walking through a Roman slave market and saw boys with pale skin and blond hair. He asked who they were and was told they were Angles—angli—a Germanic tribe.

"No," Gregory said. "Non Angli, sed angeli"—they are not Angles, but angels.

And in that moment, the dean redeemed the boy's mistake. What had seemed like an error became a revelation.

Yes, it was brilliant that he knew the story. But what truly struck me was that he chose to tell it. He saw a moment of grace and took it. He reminded us that God is a surprise.

That's what it means to bring light into the darkness. It doesn't have to be dramatic. It doesn't have to be hard. It just requires intention—the willingness to believe that nothing is beyond the reach of God's redemption.

And if we find the courage to step into the darkness, we might just find the keys to the Kingdom.

Amen.

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