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## *Seeing Old Things in a New Way*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell  
Candlemas Procession for the Feast of the Presentation – Year A**

I have seen a lot in this place. Some of it was wonder, the wonder you might feel as a child, like on Easter morning when I baptized a grandfather and his grandson, some of it was surprise, like the time at a funeral when little Richard came marching down the aisle unannounced because he said, I have something to say too after the eulogies and proceeded to hawk, I'm serious here, sell his CDs from the lectern. I also had a week where I announced that Nadia Bolz-Weber, the liberal tattooed Lutheran minister, would be here on Thursday and we would be holding Brian Kemp's inaugural prayer breakfast on Monday, or Joseph Lowery preaching from this very pulpit during our Homeless Requiem. I have seen a lot here.

And I have learned that it's not the seeing of new things, which is so amazing, but the seeing of old things in a new way. It's not the seeing of new things that's amazing, it's the seeing of old things in a different way. It is that I think is we learn to do, in order to notice that God is all around us and in us and acting through us, that's how we learn to see and reflect the light of Christ.

Now, I think Simeon has something to teach us about this way of seeing. For you see, Simeon trusts God. Simeon has been told that he must labor in the temple until the Messiah of the Lord appears, and he believes it will happen. And he goes about his spiritual practices, which is to say he goes to church a lot, and you can imagine how he is there in church paying attention. He's not looking for the Messiah because he doesn't know what the Messiah would look like. He is paying attention, looking at the same old things in a new way.

Now, I want you to think about this. Imagine you're at an airport looking for a friend. You're scanning the crowd, you're seeing all of those faces, but you're not seeing any person. You don't see who they are. You're simply noting that they're not your friend, right? You're scanning that crowd back and forth, but you're not paying attention to any particular person except to distinguish them from the one you seek. Simeon isn't doing that because he doesn't know what the Messiah is going to look like. So, through his practices and his paying attention, Simeon is removing the obstacles to sight. Jesus would later tell us that "blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

Simeon was becoming pure in heart by removing the obstacles, by allowing the light of God to shine in him and through him, and then he was passively accepting God. When Jesus appears, you can feel the delight in Simeon, and it's not because he's gained anything really. He can now face death without fear, but it's not like he's become rich or accomplished or somehow risen in status. He's just full of joy and wonder and gratitude at this moment of being in the presence of Christ, and he's not, interestingly, trying to understand Christ. He makes a prophecy, to be sure, that Christ is going to be the Savior of not only Israel, but of all the Gentile nations, and that people will oppose it. And in opposing it, learn a lot about themselves, which is to say how to remove their own obstacles to seeing things in a new way.

Again, I want you to imagine somebody who says they know you because they knew your parents, or watched you grow up, or got a copy of your Myers-Briggs results, or heard about your Enneagram number, or noticed that you were Southern and well, you know how Southerners are. Would you feel known? It is not in understanding each other that we come to know the Christ that is in each other, it is by simply being present to them and allowing the light that is in them to shine through.

Simeon, I think, has something to tell us about what it means to learn to see old things in a new way. But I want to give you a more contemporary example. It's actually tied into our Psalm, for today's Psalm 84. Here's verse 11: "No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk with integrity." Now, you might think of integrity as a willingness to be seen and to see others. That would be my working definition of integrity. But what's

interesting about this passage is that it was the inspiration for a group that was formed in middle Georgia in 1974 by a man named Louie Crew. He was an English professor at a middle Georgia University, and Louie Crew founded an organization called Integrity, inspired by this passage in order to advocate for the full inclusion of gay and lesbian persons in the Episcopal Church.

Now, by 1979, he was having some success, and so this issue became one on which there were many opinions, many of which were deeply held. And the Bishop of the Diocese of Atlanta, a man named Bennett Sims, wrote a long, well-researched, artfully written pastoral letter. The thesis of his letter was that gay and lesbian people should be prayed for and healed so that they could return to a heteronormative orientation. And this pastoral letter was well received. It was published by Christianity Today. It was endorsed by churchmen and all over the world and made the national statement of several churches in Europe. Bennett said he kept waiting for the pushback. He kept waiting for Louie Crew to say something. And finally, it happened. Louie Crew contacted Bennett Sims, and he didn't argue with the letter. He didn't argue with Bennett's heritage, or person, or spirit. He simply invited him to dinner. "Come be with us." Louie said, "And we'll talk about all of this later." And so, Bennett did.

He started going down to the monthly dinners of Integrity and simply getting to know people who were there. And he said he never could quite meet Louie's challenge. Louie said, "I as a gay man, I am just as much of a human as you are. Maybe more so, because I've had to be honest about who I am in the face of a culture who didn't want me this way." And of course, over time, Bennett was persuaded, this man who had written this scholarly work, which was accepted literally all over Europe as a normative statement of how the issue should be addressed, recanted. And he recanted with the same artfulness that he established his original position, except a lot more heartfulness.

He had learned to see an old thing in a new way. He had learned to see, I think for the same reason Simeon taught us. He had removed the obstacles to seeing God in another and in himself. And then, he had really adopted a disposition of wonder and joy to passively receive what God had to offer to him. Not searching the crowd at the airport, not thinking he understood just because he had a lot of statistical data. He was persuaded by the love he felt as he recognized that was the love of God. Blessed are the pure in heart, Jesus tells us, for they shall see God. As we go forth from this place, having thought about Simeon, I hope you'll remember his model of what it means to see old things in a new way, what it means to continue to look at things that are familiar until they become unfamiliar. Then you'll know God is talking to you. Amen.