

Sermon
Christ Church, Cooperstown
Feast of the Presentation of our Lord 2012

A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel." St. Luke 2:32

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Like most of you, I will be spending much of the rest of today in front of the television. I do want to know, after all, if the big hero will be Brady or Manning. But I also am excited to find out if Mrs. Bates is really finished, and whether Mary will really wed Mr. Carlisle, and what whips will crack from the tongue of the dowager countess. And really, I just want another look at that magnificent house. Allison and I have become rather devoted to the PBS miniseries *Downton Abbey*, which continues tonight at 9:00, after the big game is finished. It's a historical drama, set in a manor house in rural England at the time of the First World War. So far as I can tell, the staging is impeccable. The house's soaring ceilings and intricate woodwork, the elegant costumes and furniture, the details of props and references are just right and most impressive. Allison teases that when I watch a movie, it's only the setting that I care about. Though this series has quite a compelling story, it is that grand setting that keeps me thinking about series all week long. If we ever get back to England again, I'm certainly going to try to find that house.

I thought I knew the setting very well, until I went to visit my mother a few weeks ago. She has one of those flat screen TV's, with high-definition receptors—a real upgrade from ours, which we bought at someone's yard sale in Fly Creek. On mom's television, *Downton Abbey* came to life in a whole new way. The colors were so vivid, the lines so much more crisp. I might have watched 10 episodes of the show before, but it was as if I was seeing it for the first time. Everything seemed to sparkle. It was flooded with light. I doubt that we'll end up buying a new set anytime soon, but one episode of *Downton Abbey* almost had me convinced.

Recreating the scene from today's Gospel lesson would be a feat worthy of the creators of *Downton Abbey*. The story is set in the midst of the temple at Jerusalem. Those of you who took part in the Bible study after our potluck lunch last week will recall the grand scene of worship in the temple described in that passage from *Ecclesiasticus* that we discussed. It was just like that. The temple was lit by great torches, with colored stones and carvings adorning the walls. The air was thick with clouds of incense and smoke from the sacrifices. The people

joined together in great swelling choruses as trumpets echoed off the walls. It was loud and bright and throbbing with people, joining together to praise God and to call on Him for help.

And into the midst of this scene walk an ordinary man and an ordinary women, poor country folks with their little baby boy, just forty days old. They have come to make the customary offering, the two turtledoves required by the law in thanksgiving for the birth of their firstborn son. They are Mary and Joseph, and the little baby Jesus. They probably stood in line among other people to make their sacrifice, the poor with their cooing doves, the rich leading bleating sheep. You would be forgiven for missing them entirely.

But Simeon doesn't miss them. He walks up and takes the child into his arms. Now God's promise has been fulfilled, he exclaims, "for my eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared before the face of all people." He announces that this child is "the light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

Those are important words, especially when set against the backdrop that surrounded Him. The reason that the masses thronged to the temple was because they believed God's glory was present there. God's presence overshadowed the whole structure, and He lived in a special way in the inner sanctuary, a holy place set apart where only the high priest could tread. The prophets had also proclaimed long before that on a great day to come, God would send out a light for the Gentiles, a powerful sign that would draw them here, to this temple, to worship Him and learn His teaching.

This child, Simeon is saying, is the glory. He is the light. He is the realization of all that the scene around him symbolizes. The torches, the incense, the trumpets, the priests bustling about in their beautiful robes, they all point to God who isn't far away or locked up inside the holy of holies, but right here, in Simeon's arms. Whether they know it or not, all the prayers and songs, the smoke and fire and blazing color are really meant for him. Now that He is here the temple finds its true purpose, it comes to life. It's like the temple in HD—until you've seen this Child, it's like you've never really seen it at all.

He comes as the light, Simeon said, the one who brings human life its proper meaning. This Jesus is sent to bring God's presence into the heart of our walking around, everyday existence and infuses it all with glory and power. It's not just that He brings the temple to life, transforms it into something fresh and new and beautiful. That's what He does to all those people He meets. "Whoever follows me," He said in words recorded in John's Gospel, "will not

walk in darkness, but will have the light of life¹.” To meet Jesus, to take Him in your hands and welcome Him into your heart is to begin life in high-def. Joy and peace come with His presence; a knowledge that God loves us, and will stand with us through all He calls us to face. Jesus brings order to our wandering desires, and purpose to our intentions. He shows us what life is meant to be, and then supplies us with help to make it so.

It’s not that life without Christ can’t have its own excitement and power and meaning. It’s just that when we find Christ, all of that is deepened and enlivened and given new purpose. Grace, the great theologian said, does not destroy nature, it brings it to perfection. It takes all that is already good and makes it sublime. Downton Abbey was impressive on my television, but on my mother’s—well it was something entirely different, something so much better than what I had imagined before. And that’s what life is like before and after an encounter with Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you are walking in darkness, struggling in a world that seems so full of activity but so empty of meaning. You see it flash by around you, you hear the sounds and see the sights, but you just can’t quite make sense of it all. It doesn’t all connect and come into focus. Maybe you don’t know what to do with your life, or you think you know what you should do but can’t imagine how. Or maybe, you just sense a great absence within you, a void you’ve been trying to fill for so long, in so many ways that never seem to work.

The Great Light is here, for you, today. He has come to fill your life, to make of it what God has always intended. Let him light your wick, and it will burn with God’s own beauty, power and life.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ John 8:12