“*The Divine Presence*”

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Most of you know that I was raised Roman Catholic. For me, the celebration of Christmas was not restricted to one day. For my family and community, the celebration of Christmas lasted twelve days. These twelve days were filled with religious celebrations beginning on Christmas Eve. No Christmas decorations were placed in the house before December 24th. On that day a frenzy of decorating occurred. My dad and I would go into the woods and cut a Christmas tree and bring it home to be decorated.

By late afternoon the house was decorated and preparations for a family dinner were well underway. The dinner, which was held in early evening was a feast for my extended family of 20 or more people. After the meal, there would be the exchange of gifts. As a child, I was not raised in the Santa Claus tradition. Rather the gift giving was done in remembrance of the gifts of the Magi for the Christ Child.

By midnight, we were in church for Christmas Eve Mass. After mass, many people remained at church to observe the night-long Christmas vigil which lasted until 6:00 am the following morning when the Christmas Day Mass was celebrated. After mass, the family would gather again for Christmas Day breakfast. The rest of the day was a time of rest and quiet reflection. But this was not the end of the Christmas celebrations.

The day after Christmas was a celebration of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. This was followed two days late on December 28th by a mass in remembrance of the Massacre of the Innocents by Herod. New Year’s Eve was a time for reflection on the events of the old year, part of which was a night-long vigil leading up to the celebration of the mass for the Virgin Mary on New Year’s Day.

The celebration of Christmas ended five days later, on January 6 with the Feast of the Epiphany. This holy day celebrates the visit of the Magi and Jesus’s first revelation to the Gentiles. Among Irish Catholics, this day is also known as Little Christmas with the giving of gifts. This was also the day when the Christmas decorations were taken down and the Christmas tree removed from the house. It is believed that taking the decorations down before this day or leaving them up after this day was bad luck.

In the opening of his gospel, Luke recounts the birth of John the Baptist followed by the birth of Jesus. Luke is concerned with establishing both John the Baptist and Jesus as Jewish children of devout Jewish parents living closely with God. This is particularly seen in today’s text where after Jesus’ birth, Joseph and Mary are shown doing everything required by the law of the Lord concerning the birth of a child and following God’s commands in naming the Christ child.

Today’s text reveal two concepts that are important to understanding the Gospel of Luke. First, Luke wants us to understand the Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah who will restore the glory of Israel and be a revelation to the Gentiles. Second, Luke wants to emphasize the importance of religious requirements and ritual for the growth and maintenance of the life of faith. For devout Jews, the glorification of God in all aspects of life was important, even the smallest aspects of common life were lived in dedication to God. It was this devotion that Luke infused into his gospel.

While Luke seems to have been inspired by this way of faith, he also saw that there was danger in this way of faith as well. The danger is that one’s adherence to requirements can become simply a mask hiding hypocrisy and disregard for one’s love of God. Luke understood this, as exemplified in Luke’s stories of Jesus’ confrontations with the Pharisee. This conflict continued with the early Christians and led them to distinguish themselves from the Jews and their ritual and religious requirements.

It was not until the Middle Ages that Christianity had fully developed its own practices of ritual observance and religious requirements. However, throughout the Middle Ages the idea of nation states took hold leading to a structured society of royalty at the top and peasants at the bottom. The rise of nation states also was characterized by warfare between nation states and struggles for political power which included the church. These political struggles led to a widening gap between the laity and the church hierarchy.

The ever-growing imposition of strict adherence to religious requirements which benefited the political power of the church led to abuses which led to the Reformation. In reaction to these church abuses, the reformers did away with the ritual of the church. This precipitated a separation of the interior aspects of faith from the ritual expressions of faith as happened in the early church.

In our cultural and religious life, we are the heirs of the Reformation and the Enlightenment. We have inherited individualism above community. We have inherited individual faith, our personal relationship with God is primary. We have inherited an aversion to religious requirements and ritual expression of faith. In our modern, increasingly secular society, the observance of ritual and religious requirements has all but disappeared.

We have busy lives filled with demanding careers and children with myriad after-school activities. Our thoughts are filled with concerns that have taken on existential proportions. Am I making enough money? Can I afford that new house, car, vacation, the cost of college for my children? What do I need to do to get ahead? How can I find time for leisure activities or my kid’s activities? Of the many demands on my time, which are important, and which can I let go?

Amidst these concerns, where does religion fit in? Too often, our faith has become ala carte. We accept those parts of faith we like and simply ignore the parts that we don’t like or are inconvenient. With the demands on our time and the pressures of our secular society church has become one more thing that has to be balanced against other demands on our time. Where does Sunday worship rank in importance? For many churches attendance at Christmas, Easter, births, weddings, and funerals have become socially required functions. We experience life as increasingly secular, devoid of God and the presence of the holy.

The sub-text of today’s reading challenges us to reconsider how life should be lived. Rather than something to be fitted into our busy lives, we need to see our lives as based in a divine creation surrounded by the divine presence of God. In the world of Mary and Joseph, God’s presence was seen everywhere. Rather than a demand on their time, the rituals of birth, circumcision, naming, purification, and the temple were a part of a joyous life lived with God. Living in a covenant community, the rituals were an expression of faith that held the community together and gave meaning to life.

For Protestant churches, especially those in the Reformed tradition, the practice of ritual is viewed with suspicion. Ritualism is associated with the excesses of the Medieval church, cults, religious fanatics, or simply superstition. But ritual can have a very positive aspect. Practiced properly they need not be restrictive or superstition. Practiced properly they help us to celebrate the goodness and mystery of a life lived in a divine world and give us the experience and awareness of an everyday life suffused with the goodness of God.

The God of creation has given us not only salvation, but has provided us with an abundant life of joy. We need to find rituals that help us to celebrate the events of ordinary life, lived in a covenant community of faith. We are the beloved children of God and need to glorify God in the events of everyday life.