

**Bishop Daniel's Sermon for the Opening Eucharist
127th Convention of the Diocese of East Carolina
The Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple
February 4, 2010**

Tonight on the eve of our Diocesan Convention we gather here in Christ Church in the midst of the season of Epiphany, the season of the Church year in which we celebrate Jesus as the light of all people. Tonight we also celebrate the Feast of the Presentation and hear our spiritual cousin Simeon exclaim, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32, NRSV) It's Simeon's way of proclaiming down through the ages: "When Jesus enters the room the lights go on!"

Blessed John the Evangelist who also talks about Jesus being the light of the world and adds a very different twist. Brother John speaks of Jesus in the Prologue to his beautiful Gospel: "What has come into being in [Jesus] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it...The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world." (John 1: 3b-5, 9, NRSV)

Simeon alludes to it, John addresses it directly: the reality that the light Jesus brings into the world shines amid the darkness of human life and human history, for that is precisely where the Bible begins and ends. The Bible doesn't begin with the story of the Garden of Eden; the Bible begins in the darkness and formless void of primordial chaos when God says, "Let there be light..." (Genesis 1:3, NRSV) Now it's also true that the Bible ends in light; not in a garden but in a city; a city bathed in a divine light that shines so steadily and eternally that there is no darkness at all. The New Jerusalem described in Revelation is God's eternal city in the middle of a recreated universe filled with God's beloved and forgiven people, redeemed from death and sin. The heavenly city is filled with light: "And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light..." (Revelation 22:1-5, NRSV) In the end, all the darkness of human sin and the dark chapters of human history are vanquished in the light of God's redeeming love. The Bible begins in darkness and ends in light: what lies between is the story of the saving encounter between the world's darkness and the inbreaking of the divine light.

There is a story about a young boy in 19th century England looking out his bedroom window one night watching the lamplighter going about his business lighting each street lamp with the torch he carried. The little boy is watching so intently that his nanny says, "What are you staring at? It's just the lamplighter going about his usual business." The little boy responds, "Oh no, it's more than that. I'm watching him punch holes in the darkness!" In the same way, the Epiphany season and the Feast of the Presentation are not just about light, but also about darkness; about Jesus bringing light to the darkness of the human soul, the darkness of human history, your spiritual darkness and mine.

Jesus is the one true light of the world, but darkness takes many shapes. There is moral darkness...and the darkness of human suffering. There is the darkness of human prejudice and hatred. There is the darkness of human cruelty and oppression.

There is the moral darkness of a world which has organized itself around money and competition, and which now is reeling when the moral bankruptcy of a life built on the sands of greed at the expense of others is exposed, as it has been in the current economic recession. There is the moral darkness of terrorism, inflicting cruel acts on innocent victims while perversely claiming to serve God. The moral darkness of political and social violence. I think of the moral darkness of our rape of the environment and Mother Earth, for which we and our descendants must now or someday pay the price.

There is the darkness of human suffering. The suffering of the victims of the earthquake in Haiti, or those starving in Darfur or the millions of victims of the genocides of the past century. The darkness of starvation, the darkness of war, the suffering from lack of access to medical care as a basic human right, the suffering of farmworkers in our own state sprayed with pesticide as they labor in the fields to provide food for our tables.

There is certainly the darkness of racial prejudice and racism, which some have called the enduring sin of our nation. There is the social, educational and political oppression of women, exploitation of the poor, including a flourishing industry of human slavery in some parts of the world, and acts of violence against gay and lesbian people both in our country and around the world,

As followers of Jesus, who is the light of the world, we are called to punch holes in the darkness of the world and in accord with our baptismal vows, to forego punching holes in our neighbor.

I do not believe it entirely correct to claim that the Church has a mission, for sadly and far too often in its history the Church has defined its mission in terms of the exclusion, oppression and enslavement of others. Instead, I believe it is clearer to claim that God has a mission; and because God has a mission, there is a Church. God's mission is to break the chains of injustice and oppression, to welcome the stranger and to work for reconciliation in human life. God's mission in this world according to the Bible is to find the lost, feed the hungry, restore sight to the blind, to heal the woundedness of the human heart, to release the prisoner, rebuild the nations, live peaceably among all and to forgive others in the same way God forgives us. That – and more – is God's mission. And because God has a mission, there is a Church.

The Church exists to serve God's mission: To do the hard work of reconciliation among races and nations. To serve God's mission by eradicating hunger in this world. To serve God's mission by working for justice among all people and working and praying that all people are freed from racial, religious or social oppression. The Church exists to serve God's mission by loving neighbor to the same degree we love ourselves. We serve God's mission by refusing to practice violence toward another because of race or age or gender or sexual orientation. We serve God's mission by protecting the dignity of every human being. We serve God's mission by refusing to punch holes in our neighbor any longer and to begin punching holes in the world's darkness so that the One who is the world's true light can shine through our lives. The Church fulfills God's mission by becoming ever more a community of welcome and reconciliation and forgiveness in God's name.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. proclaimed a vision many years ago with stirring words broadcast from the steps of the memorial to Abraham Lincoln, a man who punched a hole through the darkness of slavery at the cost of his own life. Many others, eventually including Dr. King and Jonathan Daniels (a seminarian of The Episcopal Church) and many others have paid the same price in pursuit of the same vision. Dr. King said, "I have a dream...." And Dr. King's dream was a stirring restatement of God's dream: a dream of reconciliation, and justice and hope and peace for all people, not based on the color of their skin, or their gender or age or sexual orientation or social or economic status, but on the content of their character and attitude of their heart. It was...it is still...a magnificent dream. And the long arc of history is bent toward justice, mercy and reconciliation.

But now it is time to wake up from the dream and to enact its substance. It is time to get down to the hard work of being reconcilers in our families, our communities, in our church, our diocese and our parish, our nation and world. It is time to get down to the hard work of doing all we can do to eradicate hunger from the face of this earth. Time to get real about doing our part to alleviate human suffering in all its forms – striving for all people to have equitable access to medical care, working to free every person from fear of violence because of age, or gender, or orientation. Time to wake up from our dark human dream of conquest and domination. Time to wake up from our dark dream of exploiting our neighbor for greedy desires and time to stop abusing God's creation. It's time to wake up to the hard work and the ongoing work of punching holes in the world's darkness and letting God's light shine through.

The call of the season of Epiphany for us as disciples and followers of the One who is the Light of the World is to rededicate ourselves to God's mission in God's world; to say our Baptismal vows one more time and to roll up our sleeves and engage the tough and ongoing work of reconciliation and healing and justice and liberation in our parish, diocese and community and nation. Even though we are imperfect and sinful people, yet by God's grace we do bring God's light, for the divine light that shines in the world can never be overcome by the world's darkness.

And on that great last day, God will banish all darkness and gather up all humanity and all creation into the heavenly city which is bathed in eternal light; and washed in the perfect love of Jesus that enfolds and redeems us. And then we and all humanity and all creation will be gathered in the city seen of John: perfectly loved, perfectly restored, perfectly forgiven, perfectly reconciled, bathed in the never failing epiphany of God's love, in the company of the saints in light, singing our eternal hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Lamb upon his throne.