

About a week and a half ago, I had the opportunity to use one of the lesser-used offices in the Book of Common Prayer. The rite is called “A Thanksgiving for the Birth or Adoption of a Child.” While this rite can be done as a part of Sunday worship, I’ve usually used it in the home when I visit newborns for the first time. It’s a short little liturgy; it includes only prayers for a birth or adoption, the saying of the *Magnificat* or psalms, and a blessing of the child and of the family. It is a lovely way to welcome a new beloved child into the world.

This little liturgy may be short and under-used, but it’s been around for a long, long time. It first appeared in the very first Anglican prayer book in 1549, where it was called by a different name. In that early prayer book, and all of our prayer books through 1928, this liturgy was called the Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth. Our current Book of Common Prayer removed the word “women” from the name and added the word “adoption,” rightly acknowledging the reality that children are welcomed into all

different kinds of families in all different kinds of ways. And there was another change to the name as well. You see, in previous prayer books this rite had a kind of subtitle. Its full name was “The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth, Commonly called the Churching of Women.” In other words, this liturgy was not just about offering thanks for a woman’s deliverance from the dangers of childbirth, it was also about bringing her back into public life after, to borrow a word from Jane Austen, her “confinement.” This liturgy was entirely about the mother – about her safety and her deliverance, her health, and her returning to the fold.

If the concept of this liturgy sounds a bit strange to you, let me tell you, the old rubrics are even stranger. Here reads the 1928 prayer book: “The Woman, at the usual time after her delivery, shall come into the Church decently apparelled, and there shall kneel down in some convenient place....” You have to wonder what prompted someone to add the words “decently apparelled” to that

rubric – were women showing up in their nightgowns? Or, as I suspect, was this code for “wait to come back to church until you can fit into some of your pre-pregnancy clothes”? Our society has largely moved past the idea that a pregnant woman needs to remove herself from public life, so the idea that she would need a liturgy to mark her coming back to Church seems ludicrously old-fashioned. And, of course, it is. It’s so old-fashioned that it has its roots in the Gospel that we heard today, with Mary and Joseph and Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem exactly 40 days after Jesus’ birth.

The feast that we celebrate today marks a moment that, like the “Churching of Women,” was supposed to be all about the mother. Listen to the Gospel – Mary and Joseph have traveled to the temple not primarily to present their son, although they did hope to do that, but to hearken to the law of Moses, a law which guides the actions of the new mother and not her newborn child. Mary and Joseph were on their way to the temple for Mary’s purification, so that

Mary could offer a sacrifice to God in thanksgiving for her deliverance from the dangers of childbirth and be restored to right relationship with her community, which, because of its uncompromising attitudes about the impurity of blood, considered her to be ritually unclean for 40 days after giving birth. This day was really all about her. The law required that she go to the temple, not Jesus. The two young pigeons that she and Joseph bought were offered for her, not for her son. We may call today the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple, but the older name for this feast is probably more accurate – the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary.

And yet, even in the midst of her moment, all eyes are drawn away from her and towards the infant in her arms. All of the attention is on her child and not on her – Simeon sings that his eyes have seen the Savior; Anna tells everyone who would listen of the redemption this child will bring. The only word that is offered to Mary is not one of welcome or of blessing but of warning. “A sword will pierce your

own soul, too,” Simeon tells her, the only thing anyone says to her or about her in this entire episode.

Perhaps this is inevitable. After all, babies are very good at attracting attention. Who can look away when there is a newborn in the room? Maybe Mary and all of those thousands of mothers through the centuries who were dutifully “churched” knew that despite the prayers and offerings on their behalf, it was always going to be their children who stole the show. But this morning, just for a moment, let us turn our eyes away from the first-born, only-begotten Son who is presented and look to his holy mother. Because in this moment, Mary does something remarkable, something you won’t want to miss. For it is in this moment that Mary first gives her child away. After she offers sacrifice to God and gives thanks for all her blessings, she then turns and immediately gives that blessing away. She hands her son over, not to her husband or to another “decently apparelled” mother, but to an old man whom she has never met. Simeon the stranger takes

the child Jesus up in his arms, Luke tells us, and Mary stands watching as this unknown man sings a lullaby of light to her newborn son.

This is Mary’s Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child. This is how Mary shows her gratitude for the gift that she has been given – she offers her son to those who need him the most, to those who have been waiting and watching, searching long and lonely for the one who could bring them hope. Mary gives her son away – to Simeon, to Anna, to you, and to me. Here she is, arms outstretched, clothed in glorious apparel, holding out her son to you. He is the one who will bring about the salvation of all people. He is the one who will be a light that shines into a dying darkness. He is the one who will heal all of Creation, who will bring life out of death, who will execute justice in this and every land. He is the one, given to you, the source and the end of all our thanksgivings. Will you take him into your arms?

Preached by Mother Erika Takacs

The Feast of the Presentation

Church of the Atonement, Chicago