

This may sound cheesy, but I have a playlist on my iTunes titled “Heaven.” From time to time, I add songs to it that first seem to have nothing to do with Heaven but, upon reflection, do. So, in addition to the more obvious songs like U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” Robert Knight’s “Everlasting Love,” and Florence + the Machine’s “The Dog Days Are Over,” there are a few more subtle selections: Lyle Lovett’s “Family Reserve,” The Beta Band’s “Dry the Rain,” and the Rolling Stones’ “She’s a Rainbow.” But the first song on the list is Robert Earl Keene’s 1998 “Feelin’ Good Again.” In its simplest sense, the narrator of the song describes walking into a bar in his hometown, unexpectedly seeing old friends, and feeling a sense of belonging and happiness wash over him. But there’s more going on than meets the eye. At the beginning, the Narrator walks down Main Street into town and observes that “A chill north wind was blowin’, but the spring was comin’ on/As I wondered to myself just how long I had been gone.” This is more than a simple stroll; he is emerging from a past so cold, dark, and enduring that he cannot remember the last time he was happy. As he walks down a flight of stairs into the bar, he notices a crowd of old friends who together sing the chorus of an Otis Redding song, seeing especially, “Dan and Margarita [who] were swayin’ side by side/I heard they were divorcing, but I guess they let it slide.” This is no simple reunion; he is entering a place of deep fellowship where broken relationships are reconciled. He feels a sudden desire to buy a round of drinks for his friends but, remembering that he had not cashed his paycheck before he came to town, “I reached into my pocket, found three twenties and a ten/It feels so good, feelin’ good again.” This discovery is no coincidence; he is in a place where the economies of labor, anxiety, and scarcity are swallowed up by graceful gifts from a generous universe. And then the narrator begins to sing to us—his listening audience—as if we were his long-lost love: “I wanted you to see ‘em all, I wished that you were there/[But] I looked across the room and saw you standing on the stair. / And when I caught your eye, I saw you break into a grin/It feels so good, feelin’ good

again.” This is no simple romance; a love that once felt like nothing but a haunting memory is rediscovered, reembraced, and rekindled. If those things don’t describe Heaven—if emergence from loneliness, reconciliation from estrangement, freedom to share, and reunion and transformation of every love we have ever known do not echo with the redemptive power of the Kingdom of God—then I do not know what does.

In our Gospel reading, we hear about two significant events that take place when Joseph and Mary take the infant Christ to the Jerusalem Temple—the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Christ—each of which we commemorate today in the Christian Kalendar. Those two events set the stage for a third: the Meeting between the Holy Family and an old man named Simeon whose joy at that meeting parallels the close of Robert Earl Keene’s song. But before we talk about Simeon’s joy, we must talk about what brings Joseph and Mary to the Temple in the first place. They come to fulfill two solemn obligations placed upon new parents in the Jewish Law that find their fulfilment in Christ’s arrival.

The Purification of Mary has nothing to do with moral wrongdoing or sinfulness; it had everything to do with the Law given by Moses which commanded anyone who touched blood to observe a time of separation (and, later, a purification offering) before re-entering public worship. The postpartum period naturally involved a flow of blood, so Mary, like all observant Jewish new mothers, is commanded to offer a sacrifice at one of the altars in the Jerusalem Temple. This Purification of Mary foreshadows our own. Whereas Mary sacrificed two birds to be brought back into the community that worshiped God, Her Son is Himself the sacrifice Whose sacred Blood not only brings us back into community with God but makes our bond with God even stronger than it was before our self-centeredness broke us apart from Him. In Christ’s life, and death on the Cross, God sacrifices Himself to purify us in a way that the old system of sacrifices could only prefigure.

Likewise, the Presentation fulfills another command from God through the Law of Moses. On the night of the Passover, God struck down the firstborn in Egypt to deliver the firstborn of Israel (Exodus 12). In gratitude and remembrance of this deliverance, all Jewish new parents were commanded to present their firstborn son to God to recognize that everything in their life—including the life of their family—belongs to God, and then to “redeem” or “buy back” their son from God with an offering. But Jesus’ Presentation has a cosmic significance: while it is an act of obedience by his parents to God’s Law, it is also an anticipation that God the Father Himself will offer His only-begotten Son to redeem or buy back every man, woman, and child who has ever or will ever be enslaved to fatal self-centeredness. Therefore, Mary’s Purification and Jesus’ Presentation are our own; in Christ’s life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension, we are forever presented to the Father and reconciled with Him to be, in fact, His adopted children. In Him, we are freed from everything that would otherwise separate us from Him.

All of which leads us back to Simeon. He is described as an aged, righteous, and devout man who had received a powerful insight of hope from God the Holy Spirit that he would not taste death before he saw the Lord’s Messiah. Having waited for untold years, Simeon is suddenly prompted by the Spirit to enter the Temple at precisely the moment Mary and Joseph arrive with the infant Jesus. Mary and Joseph seem to be yet another couple of weary, new parents who carry an apparently ordinary infant from a small, unremarkable town. Yet, prompted by God the Holy Spirit, Simeon discerns the child for Who He truly is. In a tender exchange, Simeon takes Jesus into his arms and praises God with words we now know as the *Nunc dimittis*, which is Latin for “now you let depart.” In the King James version found in first Rite of Evening Prayer found in our Prayer Book, Simeon says, “Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy

salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people. A light to lighten the Gentiles, and to be the glory of thy people Israel.” (Luke 2:29–31, KJV). Simeon says two things (at least!): Jesus is a “light to lighten the *Gentiles*.” The Messiah has come to redeem not just the people of Israel but everyone beyond its borders. Incidentally, this why the Church traditionally blesses candles on this day—an outward sign that Christ is the true Light who enlightens everyone, dispersing darkness and guiding all people into the way of peace. But he also says that having finally seen God’s promise, he is now free to depart this life which can so often feel like a vale of tears and find his rest in the next life, in Heaven with God.

As with Robert Earl Keene’s “Feelin’ Good Again,” there is more going on here than meets the eye. Luke, the author of today’s Gospel, says that Simeon is “looking forward to the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25).” This is no simple, cheerful, excited but patient anticipation, like what a child feels on Christmas Eve. Simon is, in the Greek, *prosdechomai paraklesis*. He is desperately yearning to be comforted and consoled by God. He has such an urgent intensity to see God’s promise that it as if he has been in the cold and dark forever; he cannot remember the last time he knew peace, much less happiness. His hunger and his thirst for God’s presence so dominate His life that He cannot think of anything else and cannot see anyone else around him. And don’t you and I know at least a little about what this feels like? Haven’t we gone through times of such loneliness, sadness, or emptiness that it can only be the miraculous gift of God the Holy Spirit that we have the strength to simply keep walking forward, step-by-step, into an all-too-distant future made tolerable only by a desperate hope for some kind of unimaginable change? Some of us here today in this room are going through that kind of urgent yearning even now. If that is the case, then in Simeon we see a picture of the consummation of that long-suffering desire. We see a man so

desperate for God that when He finally sees God it feels like he is emerging from a limitless chilled north wind into the beginning of an eternal spring to be greeted by long-lost friends and long-forgotten loves. One day, perhaps soon or perhaps on our last day, we will see ourselves and our life as God always sees us, and we will rejoice. Surrounded by loved ones, we will forever together sing a boisterous chorus of hymns to God like old friends in a downtown bar on Main Street in our distant hometown. Which, whether we are aware of it or not, is what we are doing here today in this room on the Feast of the Presentation. We pray and sing and then kneel before His Altar to receive him not as an infant into weary arms but as the Body and Blood of Christ into the hungriest part of ourselves.

The final song on my “Heaven” playlist is Etta James 1960 classic, “At Last.” At its most basic, the song would seem to be a narrator’s description of a long-delayed reunion with the one she loves. But there is more here than meets the eye. When James sings, “At last, my love has come along/My lonely days are over/And life is like a song,” she echoes the words that Adam said when he first beheld Eve in the Garden of Eden. “At last,” he says, “this is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken (Genesis 2:23).” In this statement, the first Adam anticipates the Wedding Feast of the second Adam, Who is Christ, Who has come to claim us as His Bride. Whenever we feel ourselves in any kind or state of darkness, in whatever depth of yearning we feel to find God—cheerful or urgent, calmly patient or merely resilient—in our faith we trust He Himself already beholds us, already approaches us, already prepares to embrace us as His own. And when we finally see Him, we will—like Adam, like Robert Earl Keen, like Etta James, like Simeon—sing “At last, my love has come along/My lonely days are over/And life is like a song.”