There is something very touching about the gospel story from Luke we hear today. Mary and Joseph bring their firstborn child, Jesus, to the Temple in Jerusalem to be blessed and dedicated to the Lord.

Please forgive the lectionary designers for a bit of whiplash. Last week we heard about the fully-grown Jesus gathering his disciples. This week we flashback to when Jesus is an infant and the first milestone religious ritual in his life.

Take this as a reminder that not everything works in linear time, especially in the church.

Candidly, biblical scholars have struggled a bit with this passage from Luke because it combines two ancient rituals that were not combined in ancient Israel: the purification ritual for women after they have given birth, and the dedication ritual for first-born sons.

These two rituals don’t really happen at the same time.

What is important, I believe, is this touching grace-filled moment when Mary and Joseph give thanks for the birth of Jesus, and thanks for Mary surviving childbirth — and that alone is a major milestone in the ancient world.

As they give thanks, we even hear a hymn that is certainly among the earliest in the Christian tradition. The music is lost, but the words remain. Our choirs today are singing music written for these ancient words.

We hear this hymn in the gospel story when Simeon is at the Temple. He witnesses Mary and Joseph dedicating Jesus. We know nothing about Simeon except he is among the first to recognize that something extraordinary has happened with the birth of Jesus.

Simeon holds this infant Jesus, and he bursts into song, praising God:
“...My eyes have seen your salvation,” he sings, “which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

Simeon’s hymn proclaims something still so radical that Christians still have difficulty absorbing: Jesus brings light to all people — all people — and no one is excluded from his saving grace. No one.

Simeon proclaims that Jesus brings this transformative message of inclusion to all of Israel, and to the Gentiles — and the Gentiles are all of us — and he
proclaims Jesus will bring this message of peace, hope, healing and forgiveness to all whom he touches.

Significantly, Simeon sings this hymn to mark the dedication of Jesus at the Temple. Soon after, Anna, a prophet “of great age” sings her own hymn.

As I reflected this past week on this passage, it occurs to me that every religion and culture has milestone rituals.

These milestone rituals provide an entryway – a window – into the holiness of these moments.

These rituals help us to define meaning and structure in the most important moments in our lives.

Our secular society has these milestone rituals – graduations, birthday parties, fireworks on the Fourth of July, parades on Veteran’s Day.

Today marks an annual ritual in American life, and that would be Super Bowl Sunday. People gather to share a meal and watch a game that is rich in ceremony, with structure and rules on a playing field that is almost like a liturgy.

Human beings are liturgical beings even when we don’t think of ourselves this way. This makes us human.

I am also struck by the physicality of our liturgies.

In the church we use water, bread, wine, and olive oil to mark the most important milestones of our life: births, blessings, healings, and deaths.

Water, bread, wine, olive oil – all are used in our foundational sacrament baptism – the water symbolic of new life, the bread and wine symbolic of Christ’s promise to be with us always, and the oil symbolic of healing in this life, and healing in the next.

Water, bread, wine, olive oil – these physical elements are not magic potions, but are meant to open for us a sense of the holy to the core of our being.

This is why the centerpiece of our worship is our Holy Communion, or Holy Eucharist, a Greek word that means “Thanksgiving.”

In our Holy Eucharist, we remember the night before Jesus died as he shared his last meal with his closest followers.

On this night he calls them “friends,” and promises to be with them whenever they come together to share this meal.

As we celebrate our Holy Eucharist today, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, we make this ancient story our own story. This sacred meal long ago becomes our sacred meal right now. We open a space in time for our hearts to feel Christ’s presence.

But sadly, over the centuries, many have argued about how — or even whether — the bread and wine is changed into the Body of Christ. Much blood has been shed fighting over the presence of the Prince of Peace.
Richard Hooker, who is among the most brilliant minds of the English Reformation of the 16th century — and we in the Episcopal Church are the inheritors of the English Reformation — Richard Hooker maintained that these arguments tragically miss the mark.

To paraphrase Hooker, the question is not how are the bread and wine changed, but how are we changed by the bread and wine?

Ask yourself this yourself: How are you changed, Sunday after Sunday, week after week, by receiving the bread and wine if our Holy Eucharist?

I have been receiving Communion since I was a boy of 12.

Honestly, I can remember only a few of these holy communions, but I know that I have been changed, transformed, in this divine act of grace, by receiving the bread and wine throughout my life.

When for whatever reason I haven’t been a part of this holy meal, I know that something is missing.

The prayers, the spoken words, the bread and wine, and the music all fit together and shape us in ways we cannot fully explain, or sometimes even notice.

And this is what brings me back, no matter how far I stray, and why give thanks for this holy place, for blessings we share, and for the presence of all of you in this sacred meal. AMEN