

First Sunday after Christmas: Luke 2:22–40

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Preached for the First Sunday after Christmas, Year B

Today is the fifth day of Christmas, and I hope you're still going strong with the holy days now that the holidays are behind us. It makes me sad to see the Christmas trees already curbed for the trash man. It's like baseball fans who go home in the sixth inning to beat the traffic and miss the best part of the ball game. There's plenty more left to Christmas, so don't give up yet. We've even kept the candles burning to keep you in the mood.

The Gospel according to St. Luke records only two events of Jesus' infancy – His circumcision and naming on the eighth day of His life, and His presentation in the temple when He was forty days old. The eighth day is the day every Jewish boy of Jesus' day received the sacrament of the covenant in his own flesh. And he received his name, his identity in the community. Luke is very careful about all this. He never mentions Jesus' name through the entire story of His birth in Bethlehem. Did you catch that at Christmas? He's simply "the child," because up until the 8th day, you didn't officially have a name.

Circumcision was a sacrament that revealed your belonging to Israel. It meant that all the promises spoken to Abraham and through Moses to the people of Israel pertained personally to you. At your circumcision you became a "son of the covenant" and a "son of Israel," and so that's when you officially got your name. Luke delivers all of this in one short sentence: On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Y'shua – Jesus -, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. The Child who laid in the manger, who came to save His people, that is, all humanity, from sin, the Word become Flesh to dwell among us, now feels the sting of the Law for the first time. He is born of woman, born under the Law to redeem those under the Law with His holy precious blood and His innocent suffering and death. this is the beginning of all of that.

And then on the fortieth day the infant Jesus makes His first appearance at the temple in Jerusalem. Again, this is all according to the Law of Moses. The first-born male was considered holy, he belonged to the Lord and his parents had to redeem him, buy him back with blood sacrifice – a lamb and a dove, if you could afford it, or two doves if you couldn't.

Every first born male was a sign to Israel of God's only-begotten Son whose blood would redeem the world from sin and death.

The fortieth day was also purification day for the mother. Now you might wonder why Mary should need to be purified of anything since her Son is sinless. But that's precisely the point. No exceptions are made for Jesus, or for His mother. He is treated just like a sinner, and she is treated as though she had just given birth to one. He is "born of woman, born under the Law to redeem those who are under the Law." The whole weight of the Law falls on Jesus, and He fulfills it, literally places Himself under the Law and fills it up with Himself.

You may look at it this way. Whatever Jesus does, or has done to Him, fulfills the Law. When Jesus was circumcised, the Law of circumcision was fulfilled. When Jesus was presented in the temple and bought back with blood, the law of the first-born was fulfilled. Circumcision came to its purpose on the eighth day of Jesus' human life. It was fulfilled, filled up with Jesus. The law of a mother's impurity and the redemption of the first-born came to its purpose when Jesus' was forty days old. It was fulfilled, filled up with Jesus. And, if you take that all the way to Jesus' baptism, and His suffering and death on the cross, the entire Law came to its purpose when the Son of God died on the cross. It was fulfilled, accomplished, finished.

Everything in this morning's Gospel speaks fulfillment. Even the numbers demand our attention. The fortieth day of Jesus' life is exactly 490 days, or seventy weeks, since the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the same temple next the incense altar. And so there are exactly 70 times 7, or "seventy sevens" as the angel Gabriel told the prophet Daniel, between Gabriel's appearance to John in the temple and the Incarnate Son of God's appearance in the temple. Coincidence? No – fulfillment.

If you're into numbers, think about Anna, the prophetess who was also there that day. She had been married for a perfect seven years, and she was now eighty four years old (that's 12 times 7). The numbers of her life shout out "fulfillment." God is true to His word. She spent all her days and nights in the temple waiting for the Messiah, certain He was coming in her lifetime. And when she sees Jesus, 40 days old in His mother's arms, she can't help but praise and give thanks to God, and tell everyone about Him.

We have no idea how old Simeon was. We know that God told him he wouldn't die until he'd seen the fulfillment of God's promise. Every day he went to the temple, watching, waiting, wondering if this was the day. One day he sees a man and a woman walking in the temple

courtyard, and the young woman is carrying a little boy in her arms. The man is carrying the poor man's redemption price – two small pigeons. And the Holy Spirit whispers to old Simeon, "That's the One. He's the One you're waiting for." Tears must surely have come to old Simeon's eyes as he received the 40 day old baby Messiah in those ancient arms. It was as though the entire OT, the whole Torah and the prophets were cradling the little Child and singing His praises. And when Simeon breaks into song and says, "Lord, dismiss your servant in peace," he speaks on behalf of all of Israel. Israel's purpose is fulfilled. Israel can depart in peace, because the Glory of Israel had come to the temple.

This Child that Simeon is holding in his arms, He is God's salvation in human flesh. He is the Light that reveals God's goodness and mercy to the Gentiles, the outsiders. He is the Glory of God's people Israel, the insiders. He is the Savior not of some but of all. Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph "marveled at these things" just as they marveled at what the shepherds told them the night Jesus was born. These are marvelous things – that a little Child should be the salvation of God, the promised Light of the nations, the Glory of Israel.

The world looks and sees nothing more than an eight day old Jewish boy screaming at the top of his little lungs. Or a forty day old with his parents in the temple. Only two people took notice of Christ that day – Anna and Simeon. No priests showed up to pay homage. No teachers of the Torah gathered around to see the fulfillment of their teaching. No Pharisees came to stare in the face of perfected humanity. No, only Simeon and Anna were there to welcome and embrace Him. And the only reason they recognized Him is the Holy Spirit told them. Otherwise they wouldn't have known either.

He's the world's Baby, but don't expect the world to embrace Him. "He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him." Simeon warned Mary that the cross will mark this Child's life. He would be destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel. Many would rejoice in His coming, especially those who were on the fringes. Many would also greet His coming with hostility, especially those who were invested in the religious institutions of Israel – the priests, the teachers of the Torah, the Pharisees. You can never be neutral about Jesus. You either receive Him for who He is, or you reject Him. But there is no agnostic, undecided, third way. There is no saying, "I'm not sure." You have His claim and the testimony of the Scriptures. He's the Son of God and the Savior of the world or He isn't.

Simeon said this sweet little Child "would be a sign spoken against." Wherever Jesus is, there is controversy. He came to announce God's pardon and peace, but He drew hostility and anger.

People get mad when they lose their religion. The Gospel isn't "good news" for those who want to justify themselves. But for the broken, the desperate, those who don't have a leg to stand on before God, it's the best news you could ever hear. Here is God's little Lamb, the perfect unblemished sacrifice for the sin of the world, making His first appearance in the temple, the place of sacrifice.

Many come to church to feel good about themselves. They seek approval for what they are doing. They seek to boost their self-esteem. They want uplift, inspiration, escape, an alternative drug. When Karl Marx called religion the "opiate of the masses," he was right. That's what the masses want – a drug. They don't want to hear about their sin. They don't want to deal with their death. It doesn't feel good.

It's us too. Each of us. It's me. I get caught in the same thing. It's Christmas and you're supposed to be joyful and happy and peaceful and loving to everyone. And that would be fine except for the fact that people make it so difficult to be joyful and loving. Christmas has this way of bringing out the best and the worst in us all at the same time. Tempers run short in this season of peace. People get depressed in this season of joy. We expect that God is going to fix all that, somehow.

We all say that "Jesus is the reason for the season," but we sometimes forget the reason Jesus came in the flesh in the first place. It wasn't so He could have a birthday party once a year. He came to die with our sin. He came to reconcile humanity to God. He came to be humanity's new Head, the second Adam who gets it right. He came to embody all of us in His own body – born of Mary, circumcized on the 8th day, presented and redeemed in the temple at 40 days, baptized in the Jordan river, crucified on Calvary, raised from the dead.

The cross hangs large over the whole scene. You can't escape it. Christmas has a cross shadowing over the Christ Child. It's there in His circumcision, the shedding of His blood as a "son of the covenant." It's there in the sacrifice to redeem the world's Redeemer. Simeon spoke soberly to Mary. A sword was going to pierce her own soul too. Her being the Mother of the Messiah was going to mean heartache and sorrow for her. You mothers of sons, you know. You have hopes and dreams. Imagine the sorrow of watching your first born son mocked, rejected, ridiculed, crucified. Not even Jesus' own mother is exempted from the cross. Nor are any of us.

If you are less than joyful on this fifth day of Christmas, that's OK. If your Christmas was less than merry, that's OK. If all the talk of "peace, peace" when there is no peace rings a bit hollow in your ears, that's OK. You are sensing the cross that lies under Christmas. But remember, and cling to this. The cross is the way to resurrection and life and joy that has no end and peace that surpasses our understanding. Your weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.

Or maybe your Christmas actually was joyful, happy, filled with family and friends, pleasant memories and gifts. Perhaps you felt a little closer to God this year, held the Christ Child a little closer. And that's good too. And you must remember and cling to this, as Mary did: Christmas comes with a cross, and all who follow the Christmas Child will know the sword that pierced Mary's soul.

You and I are like a lot like old Simeon and Anna in the temple. Watching, waiting for that Day when it all becomes visible to our resurrected eyes and we won't have to trust anymore. God still gives us the signs, those little signposts for faith to cling to – Baptism, the Word, the Body and Blood. We embrace Him as old Simeon and Anna once embraced Him. And we take up Simeon's song and make it our own: "Lord now let your servant depart in peace according to your Word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people. A Light for revelation to the Gentiles, the Glory of your people Israel." When I was little, I used to think this song meant, "Great, church is almost over and we can get out of here." But that's not what Simeon was singing. He was saying, "Now I can die and rest in peace. I've seen Your salvation and I know it's mine in this Your little Child."

Old Pastor Korby said it best. He can't talk much anymore because of a stroke, but what he once said bears repeating. Commenting on Simeon's song which we sing after the Lord's Supper, he said, "We go to the Sacrament as though we were going to our death, so that we might go to our death as though going to the Sacrament."

Like old Simeon and Anna, receive God's Child, Jesus your Savior, and leave with a song on your lips. "Let your servant depart in peace." You can rest in peace. Your life is in Jesus' hands. His birth is your birth; His circumcision is your inclusion, His presentation is your presentation – all of that and more are yours in God's Child your Savior Jesus.

A blessed fifth day of Christmas to all of you.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen.

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 2:22-40 (1 Christmas B)", posted 2002-12-29 (<https://htlcms.org/2002/12/luke-222-40-1-christmas-b/>).