

First Sunday after Christmas: Luke 2:22–40

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It is forty days after Christmas and we've come to February 2nd and the Presentation of our Lord. The little high priest pays a visit to the temple. And being only forty days old, he can't quite make it on his own so he has to be brought there by Mary and Joseph. What happens to Jesus is prescribed by the Law of the Lord – “Every male who first opens the womb shall be holy to the Lord.” If it is an animal you sacrifice it. If it is a baby boy, you offer an animal in his place, or in this case, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” Mary and Joseph were poor, we surmise. So it is: life for life. The Redeemer of the world is redeemed by the blood of a couple of pigeons. Go figure.

The presentation also did double duty as purification for the parents. They'd brought a sinner into the world, and so they must be purified. But that isn't quite how it went, is it? First, they did not bring this One into the world. He is virgin born, conceived by the Spirit with God as His Father. Though He shares in our flesh and blood of His mother, He does not share in the Sin of our Father Adam. From what then do Mary and Joseph need to be purified if their son is the sinless Son of God?

Here we get to the heart of the matter. What's Jesus doing in the temple? Answer: Fulfilling the Law of the Lord, for the salvation of the world. He's doing Israel from beginning to end. Even as a forty-day-old baby carried in the arms of his mother, He is the Redeemer of the world. His parents are purified not because of their sin in conceiving and bearing Him, but because of our sin for which He was conceived and born. He was redeemed by sacrifice not in order to save Him, but that one day He might offer Himself as the one-time atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world. For now, two turtle doves. But in time, His cross and His blood offered for the life of the world.

He was presented in the temple this day so that you and I might be presented to God eternally.

Everything about this episode speaks of “fulfillment.” There are no accidents or coincidences here. If you follow Luke carefully, you will realize that the last time the temple came into view

was 490 days before when the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah the priest in the temple. 490 days. Seventy times seven of which the prophet Daniel spoke.

Then there are Simeon and Anna waiting in the temple. They're like the whole Old Testament reduced to these two senior citizens of Israel. Simeon was told he wouldn't die until he had seen with his own eyes the fulfillment of Israel. Anna was 84 years old (that's 12 sevens if you're keeping score) and she was married seven years and then lived as a widow, living in the temple, watching and waiting for God to make good on His promises. It's as though the whole Old Testament, all the prophets of Israel, all the mothers and widows of Israel, were patiently watching with these two, waiting to see the fulfillment in this Child of God born to Mary and Joseph.

It must have been a dramatic moment when old Simeon took the little One into His arms and lifted those cataract clouded eyes to heaven and said, "Master, dismiss your servant in peace as you have promised." Or as we sing it, "Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant, depart in peace, according to Thy Word." He prays as a slave imploring his master for his promised freedom. He was ready to die in peace, trusting in the promises of God. "To live is Christ, to die is gain." Simeon believed that as he held his own salvation in his arms. This little forty-day-old baby was his redemption, his freedom, the fulfillment of God's promises, a Light for revelation to the nations, and the glory of Israel. This little child, indistinguishable from any other child, was the One Israel was waiting for with the longing of Simeon and Anna in the temple.

We sing Simeon's song most Sundays. It's the standard post-communion hymn among Lutherans. Historically, you sang it at the close of the day, before you put your head down on your pillow. It was your "now I lay be down to sleep" prayer in the quiet confidence that "if I die before I wake," Christ would have me covered by His death and life.

Lutherans in the 19th century put Simeon's song into the divine service, just after the distribution of the Lord's Supper. It's a fine addition. Like Simeon, all our hopes and desires for life are answered in God's Son, who is presented to us not as a forty day old baby, but in the humility of a meal – bread and wine, His own Body and Blood which He gives to us. We receive Him too, as Simeon did, and all of God's promises of forgiveness, life, and salvation are fulfilled in us. And, like old Simeon who eagerly embraced his own death, we are prepared to die as well. We go the Supper as though we were going to our death so that we might approach our death as though we were going to the Supper.

Simeon preaches the cross. It's the first time the cross is mentioned in Luke's Gospel. "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." Jesus' death and resurrection would mean the fall and rising of many in Israel, and more than that, it would be the death and resurrection of the world. You can't be neutral toward this Child, even in the hidden humility of His infancy. He will either be your Savior and life, or you will stumble over Him in unbelief and fall. There is no other alternative.

Simeon preaches the cross to Mary as well. A sword would pierce her own soul too, as she watched the sword pierce her Son's side. Mary would have to endure the unspeakable pain and horror of watching her first-born Son be crucified. Every mother feels that in the depths of her soul. Joseph would be spared this. He is not there at the cross; presumably he had died already. In fact, he disappears from Luke's narrative at the end of this chapter when Jesus is twelve years old. But Mary would be there as her Son gave His life to redeem the world including her, just as she is in the temple with Joseph to redeem her Son.

The operative word for today, the Presentation of Our Lord, is "redemption." Here the One who is the redemption of Jerusalem, the redeemer of Israel, the redeemer of the whole world and all of humanity, is Himself redeemed by the poor man's sacrifice of two little pigeons. Such a small price to pay for such a great gift! How can the blood of a couple of birds compare with the blood of Jesus shed on the cross? This is how our works, our pious efforts, our attempts at holiness compare with the works, the piety, the prayers, the holiness of Jesus. They are, as Luther once quipped, like a flea on the nose of a donkey pulling a cart. They simply don't compare.

To redeem means literally "to buy back." It's what you did to set a slave free. You paid the redemption price. In offering a humble sacrifice for their first born, Mary and Joseph were saying to God, "He's all yours, but couldn't we please have him back just for a little while." In that way, Jesus took His place with every baby boy in Israel. He was redeemed by blood, reminding every Israelite parent of that fateful night in Egypt when the firstborn was redeemed by the blood of the Lamb painted on the doorpost, the night when Death passed over where the blood of the Passover Lamb was.

You are redeemed: Purchased and won from Sin, Death, and captivity to the power of the devil. Not with gold or silver. Money can't redeem a life. It takes blood. The holy precious blood and the innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ in your place, having become your

Sin, embracing you in your Death, so that you might be His own (belong to Him), and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, as surely as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.

The Redeemer was redeemed in order to redeem you. Blood was shed under the Law to buy Him back for His parents, so that His blood might be shed under the Law to buy you back from captivity to Death. It's sometimes asked, "Whom did Christ pay? To whom did He offer His blood? Was it the Father? The Devil? Whom?" The answer is the Law. Our slavery to Sin and Death is the Law. We are born in a debtor's prison. There is an outstanding bill to be paid – the Law that condemns us, the Law that causes our consciences to accuse or make excuses. That debt must be paid. There must be obedience – perfect, sinless, holy, active obedience. There must be a death – perfect, sinless, spotless, unblemished sacrificial death. That's what this Child in Simeon's arms is all about. He is the fulfillment of the Law. He actively fulfills it with His perfect life. He passively fulfills it with His perfect death. And He gives them to you as a gift of your Baptism. His life, His death are yours.

As Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple as a tiny baby to be redeemed, as Simeon and Anna held Jesus in their arms and proclaimed His redemption to Israel, so now He holds you before the Father in His arms, and presents you to the Father redeemed by His blood.

Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant, depart in peace.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Luke 2:22-40 / 2 February 2014 (Presentation)", posted 2014-02-03 (<https://htlcms.org/2014/02/luke-222-40-presentation-2-february-2014/>).