

Presentation

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Luke 2:22–40

And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. (Luke 2:22-40)

Over the next two Sundays, we get two events from the childhood of Jesus – His presentation in the temple at 40 days and His sitting with the teachers of the temple at 12 years. Both events are temple events, as the Lord comes to His temple yet in a hidden way, as a 40 day old infant, and as a precocious 12 year old boy questioning the rabbis.

Everything here cries out “fulfillment.” Jesus is the fulfillment of OT Israel. He is the Son of Israel, the Son of Abraham, Son of David, the true Davidic King. He is prophet and priest. He is everything promised of Israel in one man. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple on the 40th day, that was precisely 490 days since the angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah in the temple. 70 times 7 days. Perfect prophetic fulfillment, as Gabriel had told Daniel. This is no coincidence, but fulfillment.

As long as we’re talking numbers here, the prophet Anna also speaks fulfillment. She had been married a brief seven years, and now she was 84, which happens to be 12 times 7. The number of her life’s years bears witness that she is living in the time of fulfillment. Together with Simeon, she waited and watched in the temple for the coming Messiah. She remembered the passage from Malachi: “Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple, the messenger of the covenant whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

And so these two senior citizens of Israel watched and waited; the prophet and the prophetess, embodying OT Israel. Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Messiah. Usually the case is you find out you don’t have long to live. But Simeon learned he wasn’t going to die until he had laid his eyes on the promised One of Israel. That wasn’t so much a death sentence as it was a life’s sentence. Every day Simeon would awaken and wonder, “Is this the day?” Everyone who came to the temple would make him wonder, “Is this the one?”

Then one day Mary and Joseph came to the temple with Jesus, 40 days old. It was their purification day. Stop right there. Purification day? For what? Mary was a virgin, and her Child was the sinless Son of God. What need was there for any purification. This was a pure a birth as there could possibly be. Ah, but here's the Gospel. Whatever Jesus does, and whatever is done to Him, is to fulfill all righteousness, to fulfill the Law. At eight days He was circumcised under the Law. At forty days, He was brought to the temple, in accordance with the Law of Moses. He has joined the human race, not only sharing in our flesh and bone, but sharing in our burden, the burden of being sinners under the Law.

It is also His redemption day. Think about it. The Redeemer is brought to the temple to be redeemed. Every first-born male was holy to the Lord. Even the animals. They had to be redeemed, bought back with blood. The Redeemer is redeemed by the blood of two doves, the poor man's sacrifice. "He was poor for ours sake, so that by His poverty we might become rich." It's all there already in place – Jesus the Substitute, Jesus the Redeemer, holy to the Lord, dedicated to die in our place. And all of it, before Jesus can utter a word or even walk. Like a baby brought to Baptism, the Lord of all must be carried to His temple for His first appearance.

When Simeon saw the holy family and looked at this child, his old heart must have skipped a beat as the Spirit testified to his spirit that this was the promised One, the One he had been waiting for all these years. He gathers the little One in his tired arms and lifts his cataract-blurred eyes to heaven, seeing clearly through the eyes of faith. And he prays:

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 the glory of Thy people Israel.

You know that hymn. You sing it almost every Sunday after the Lord's Supper. You sing it with Simeon as you receive the Body and Blood of the promised One, His gift to you. As genuine a presence as when Simeon held that sacred Baby in his arms. You pray with Simeon. "Let your servant depart in peace, according to Thy word." I can die now, in peace. That's what it means. Simeon was waiting to die.

When I was a child, and we sang this at the end of the Holy Communion, I used to think it meant we could go home, the service was finally ended. And I prayed it sincerely, ‘Lord, let your servant depart in peace’ so I can go outside and play. But that’s not what it means. It means we can now die in peace, having seen and heard the Lord’s salvation. I don’t think we realize it often enough, that what we hear and see and do here is more about our death than it is about our life. On many Sundays, I’m sure you go home and say, “That was nice but what does this have to do with my life.” We might prefer, perhaps, something more relevant and timely – something about our economy or how to have a better marriage or how to raise our children. We want to hear how to live while God wants to teach us how to die, because in the economy of the cross, dying is the only way to live.

The cross looms large of this passage. Did you catch it? “Behold this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed, and a sword will pierce through your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” This Child, embraced by Simeon and Anna, of whom the prophets of Israel spoke, would be rejected by Israel. “He came to His own, but His own people did not receive Him.” His coming precipitates a crisis of faith and unbelief, of rising to faith in Him or falling in unbelief against Him. There is no middle ground, no neutral position when it comes to Jesus. You either trust Him or you don’t. You can’t refashion Him or reinvent Him. You receive Him as He is – your Christ and Lord and Savior, or you reject Him in unbelief.

This Child comes with a sword and a cross. Mary would live to see her Son crucified. She would stand at the foot of the cross and watch her first-born die. The sword would pierce her gentle soul too. What a burden that must have been for her to bear! She knew that this Child did not belong to her; she was there in the temple to redeem Him back from the Lord with a sacrifice. But she knew that she could only have Him for a little while. He had come to save His people from their sins.

The Child of the manger is born with blood on His hands. No escaping. It’s the blood of our sin, our rebellion against God, our atheism, our rejection. Today, December 28th, the fourth of the twelve days of Christmas, is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, commemorating the baby boys of Bethlehem who died at King Herod’s sword for no other reason than they resembled Jesus. That’s a harsh way to celebrate the joy of Christmas, but it faces squarely the reality that this cute little Baby all swaddled and manged on Christmas morning is a warrior destined to do battle with the darkness, the devil and his demons, with Death itself.

The work of redemption is bloody work. It isn't with unbloody gold or silver that we are redeemed from sin, death, and the Law. That would be a tidy transaction – the way we like it. But we are redeemed by Christ's holy precious blood, and His innocent suffering and death, of which the baby boys of Bethlehem were only a picture and Rachel's tears were a preview of blessed Mary's tears as she beheld her Son, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Christmas joy inevitably gives way to reality. Presents are unwrapped, the tree eventually gets put out on the curb or packed away, the lights grow dim, we return to our business as usual whatever that may be. We will be facing a challenging year financially, personally, spiritually. Some of you may not have jobs or an income next year. Some of you are facing health crises or family issues. None of us knows what the coming days, weeks, and months will bring.

But like old Simeon and Anna in the temple, we are given to embrace the Christ-Child in Word and Sacrament, and having embraced Him in the arms of faith, we are prepared for the future, because this Child of Mary, this Baby of Bethlehem is our future. Israel's glory, our Light and our Life.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Hacienda Heights, CA (htlcms.org), "Presentation", posted 2008-12-28
(<https://htlcms.org/2008/12/presentation/>).