

MARY HAD A LITTLE LAMB

Luke 2:22-40

The Purification of Mary and The Presentation of Our Lord

February 2, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Today we observe The Purification of Mary and The Presentation of Our Lord. This is one of those once-every-seven-years-on-average festivals. Even though we don't actually know the date of Jesus' birth, we do know that in real time the purification of Mary and the presentation of Jesus happened exactly forty days after Jesus' birth, because that was the time prescribed in the Law of Moses. And so we observe it on what would be the fortieth day of Christmas, which comes out to February 2. It's not one of the major festivals, so it doesn't take over the nearest Sunday. But when it happens to fall on a Sunday, it's an appropriate event to consider, and it's a way to squeeze a little more Christmas into our life.

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 22 through 40. It is on page 725 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 2, beginning at verse 22, we read in Jesus' name.

²² And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation

³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel."

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

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³⁹ And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Mary had a little lamb. As far as I know, the author of that little nursery rhyme didn't give any thought to the Virgin Mary or the child she bore, who is the Lamb of God. But every time I hear it, I can't help but think of the Virgin Mary and the spotless Lamb of God.

Mary had a little Lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow,
And everywhere that Mary went
The Lamb was sure to go;
(Because that's how it goes with mothers and their babies)
To the temple the fortieth day,
for that was Moses' rule.
It made the faithful bless and pray
To see the infant Lord.

Sorry, I couldn't make that last line rhyme, so I chose to just say something good and true instead of forcing a weird rhyme.

This is really a fascinating text. There is much more going on than first meets the eye.

From all outward appearances, it looks like any ordinary Jewish family coming to the temple to make the required sacrifices. But nothing is really what it seems with this family. We already know that Joseph isn't really the father of this child, but Mary was not unchaste. And the baby looks like every other Jewish baby, and he *is* like every other Jewish baby, except that he is born without sin, and he is also the Son of God. These things are certainly unique, but none of them are obvious to the naked eye.

They came to Jerusalem and to the temple in obedience to the Law of Moses. It's helpful here to understand a little bit of the Old Testament law. This was commanded in Leviticus (12:1-8). Mothers were considered "unclean" for seven days after giving birth to a male child.

And it's important to note that "unclean" is not synonymous with "sinful." Sinful behavior could make a person unclean, but not everything that resulted in uncleanness was necessarily sinful. Sometimes righteous activity, like giving birth to a child or burying your loved ones, could make a person unclean. Or certain medical conditions could make a person unclean. In the case of childbirth, the uncleanness reminded the Israelites that we live in a fallen world. It reminds us of the curse God pronounced upon Eve in the Garden of Eden:

"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen. 3:16).

The blood and the ceremonial uncleanness was a reminder that this is not the way the world is supposed to be. So the mother has not sinned, but the uncleanness reminds her that the suffering involved in childbirth is a result of the fall into sin.

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So when a mother gave birth to a male child, she was unclean for seven days. Then on the eighth day, the boy was circumcised. So this happened to Jesus too (2:21). His circumcision, by the way, is the first recorded instance of Jesus shedding his blood. This eighth day was also the start of the mother's purification, which lasted thirty-three days. So there was a total of forty days, and at the end of these forty days, the mother was required to go to the temple.

In Joseph and Mary's case, there were two purposes for this trip to the temple. First, since Jesus is Mary's firstborn child, he was to be consecrated to the Lord (2:22-23; Ex. 13:2). This didn't require a sacrifice, and the timing of it isn't specified in the Law of Moses, so it seems that Jews simply did this when it was the proper time for the mother to offer a sacrifice.

This sacrifice was the second purpose for their trip to the temple. The sacrifice consisted of two animals. First, she was to offer a lamb for a burnt offering, and then also a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. That's the command God gave through Moses. But he also made a provision for poor people. Birds were a lot less expensive than lambs, so if she could not afford a lamb, she could offer two turtledoves or two pigeons instead. And this is kind of nice, since you don't want to put a financial burden on families who just got another mouth to feed.

Perhaps you noticed that this is what Mary did. She brought two birds instead of a lamb and a bird. This is how we learn that the holy family was poor. We got a little bit of a hint at their poverty in the birth narrative, with Jesus being laid in a manger (2:7). But that's just a hint, since the real reason they were there was that there was no room in the inn. We don't really know they are poor until we get to Mary's sacrifice. But here we see that the eternal Son of God, through whom all things were created, was born into nothing. Think about that. Let that sink in. The Son of God was born into a family that could not afford a one-year-old lamb.

This trip to the temple is significant for a number of reasons. I counted four ways this is theologically significant, which means there could be more than four, but I'll give you the four I know of.

First, the simple fact that Mary had to go and offer sacrifices reminds us that Jesus was born under the Law. Even though Jesus was a pure and sinless child, Mary was not spared from the pain and uncleanness of childbirth. The uncleanness is the result of blood. If there's no blood, the woman is not unclean, and she doesn't have to offer sacrifices. But there is always blood, because this is the curse of the fall into sin. Giving birth to Jesus made Mary unclean because he was born under the curse of the Law. This reminds me of what Paul says in Galatians 4: "When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons" (4:4-5). When Jesus took on human flesh, he did not hold himself aloof from our curse. He willingly subjected himself to the curse we are subject to, in order that he might redeem us from the curse.

We might think that life was easier for Jesus, since he was the Son of God, like he gets to use his special power to his benefit. We see this sometimes with very important people. When they condescend to interact with ordinary people like us, their VIP status gets them special treatment, and so the ordinary parts of life aren't as burdensome on them. They get to skip to the front of certain lines. But Jesus did not use any VIP privileges. He was born under the Law. He was born under the curse. He went through everything we go through. Childbirth was a traumatic experience, both for him, and for his mother. If he doesn't go through all the things we are subject to, then he doesn't actually redeem us from the curse. So he doesn't skip out on anything. He endures all of it. He was "born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law." That's the first way this event is theologically significant.

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The second way it is significant is that it reveals his poverty. Remember, this is what we learned from the fact that Mary brought two birds to the sacrifice instead of a lamb and a bird. Jesus was born in poverty. Poverty is another consequence of the fall into sin. It's part of the curse. But it's not a part of the curse that everyone experiences. And I don't have a theological explanation for that; it's just the way the world is. Jesus could have been born into great riches instead, but the plan of God—and that means it was Jesus' plan, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit—the plan of God was for Jesus to be born into poverty. This shows that Jesus came for all people, not just the wealthy. Again, this is a case of Jesus not holding himself above our suffering. He endured every part of the curse.

The third way this event is significant is that it reveals Jesus as the Lamb of God. When you think about it, it's actually very fitting that Mary and Joseph were too poor to bring a lamb for the sacrifice, because they already had a Lamb, "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Even at the young age of forty days, this foreshadows his crucifixion. All the sacrificial lambs in the Old Testament were simply placeholders. They foreshadowed Jesus, God's final and perfect lamb of sacrifice. Now the real lamb is here. He wasn't sacrificed that day, but he was presented to the Lord as the sacrifice who would one day take away the sin of the world.

The fourth way the presentation of Jesus is significant is that it is the fulfillment of the prophet Malachi, who said, "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal. 3:1). Do you realize that this is the first time, ever, when God came to his temple in human flesh? And it's in the flesh of a forty-day-old infant. Previously, God came in the form of a cloud, and his presence settled above the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. But even that hadn't been the case for almost six hundred years. After the destruction of Solomon's temple in 586 BC, there is no sign of the ark. The throne of God was gone. When the Jews returned and rebuilt the temple seventy years later, it paled in comparison to the first temple (Ezra 3:12), and the most glaring deficiency was the absence of the ark of the covenant. Here's why: God had promised to dwell above the ark, but without the ark, the cloud of God's presence doesn't come back into the temple. God's presence was attached to this wooden box overlaid with gold. For this reason, the ark was associated with God's glory (e.g., 1 Sam. 4:21-22). When the ark left a place, the glory of God left. When the ark came to a place, the glory of God came, because God's presence was attached to the ark. So the prophet Haggai, even though the ark was missing from the second temple, prophesied, "The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of Hosts" (Hag. 2:9). How can that be? How can the second temple surpass the glory of the first temple, when it's an inferior structure, and it doesn't have the ark of the covenant? It's because God comes to this second temple, not in a cloud above the ark, but in actual flesh and blood—the body of Jesus Christ.

So there's really a lot going on here that isn't visible to the naked eye. It looks like an ordinary Jewish family coming to do what is required of them. But despite the ordinary appearance, there are two people at the temple who see what's really going on: Simeon and Anna.

We have Simeon's words recorded for us, so we'll focus on him. As far as we know, he's not a priest; he's just a man from Jerusalem. But he is a faithful man, and the Holy Spirit revealed to him that he would not see death until he saw the Lord's Christ. And when he sees this ordinary and poor Jewish family come in, he sees beyond the outward appearance and sees this for what it really is: the salvation of Israel, which is really the salvation of the entire world, and the return of

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God's glory. And so he says, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace" (2:29). In other words, *My life is complete. I can die in happy, because I have seen salvation in the face of a forty-day-old infant.* Now Jesus hasn't done what he came to do yet. He has not yet offered himself on the cross. It would be another thirty years or so before he does that. But Simeon is ready to die, because he has seen his salvation. Even though the victory is not yet won, he is at peace, because he knows it is certain. It's kind of like if your favorite team is in the Super Bowl, but your star player is questionable. But then, when it's game time, he runs out of the tunnel dressed for action, and he takes the field. Your fears are set at ease and you say, "Alright, this one's in the bag," even though the game is just starting. The difference, of course, is that the Super Bowl still needs to be played before you see the outcome. Your star player could fail. But Jesus will not fail. Simeon knows the outcome. He knows that the Lord's salvation will not fail. God will do what he promised.

Traditionally, the Church has used Simeon's words in connection with the Lord's Supper, and this is very appropriate. We recognize that a similar thing occurs here. It's another case of something being more than meets the eye. And, again, it's solely because of the promise of God. The Lord came to his temple in the flesh of an infant. Here the Lord comes to us in the forms of bread and wine. And he comes bringing the salvation he purchased for us at the cross. This bread is Jesus' true body, and this cup is Jesus' true blood. You are about to hold Jesus in your hand. You are about to receive him through your mouth and into your body. So we can pray the same thing as Simeon: "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace." Jesus comes to us here. This is what you must believe concerning the Lord's Supper: Jesus is present in the forms of bread and wine, because he says he is, and he comes bringing forgiveness. So when you receive Christ's body and blood today, pray this in your heart, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace." That doesn't mean you will walk out of this sanctuary to your death. It might, or it might simply mean that you are departing in peace to love and serve your neighbor. But it does mean that if you walk out of this sanctuary to your death, you will be departing in peace, because you received the Lord's salvation.

This is not your own doing, of course. It is because this Lamb of God, who first came to the temple as a forty-day-old infant, went all the way to the cross, to sacrifice himself for the sin of the world. This is the salvation God has prepared for the whole world, and that includes you. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.