

A PEACEFUL DEPARTURE

Luke 2:22-40

The Purification of Mary and Presentation of Our Lord

February 2, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 22 through 40. 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.

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.

Dear Christian,

You have the privilege of dying happy. Your heavenly Father, through his Son Jesus Christ, has given you this gift that, when you come to the hour of death, he will grant you a blessed end and graciously take you from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven. You have the gift of

dying happy. I don't mean that it will be an enjoyable and pain-free experience. No one can tell you what the specifics of that moment will be like. But through Jesus Christ, your heavenly Father has given you this gift, to know that your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, and that you will inherit eternal life in his new creation.

We should all contemplate our deaths. Maybe not all the time, that probably wouldn't be healthy. But it is right and healthy, from time to time, to give our full attention to contemplating our deaths. I will die. You will die. Your parents will die. Your children will die. Do not hide yourself from this law. Unless Jesus returns first, we will die. So how do we want it to be? Some people hope to be surrounded by loved ones. If that's you, make sure that you give love to people now. Or you might want to go out doing something you enjoy, like gardening or skydiving. If that's you, you should do a lot of gardening or skydiving. As Christians, we should desire to die confessing the faith. Therefore, we should spend our lives learning and confessing this Christian faith.

Some people have a "bucket list." It's a list of the fun things they want to do before they "kick the bucket." There's something a little bit anti-Christian about that. Not that it's totally bad. If you have a list of things you want to do, that's okay. But the premise for such a list might be faithless. The idea is that you only live once, so you have to make the most out of this life. And when it's gone, you won't have the chance to go back and do all of the fun things you wanted to do. You might feel that your life is incomplete if you don't do all the things you want to do. But in the new creation, when you reflect on your life on earth, if that's even something we'll be able to do, you will not think, *Man, I really wish I would have seen the Grand Canyon.* You are free to enjoy the beauties of this creation, but we don't have to squeeze every last ounce of enjoyment from this life, because we have an eternity of blessing ahead of us. Dying isn't the worst thing; it's not even close.

In this gospel lesson, there is a man with one thing on his "bucket list": to see the Lord's Christ. Then he says, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace" (2:29). He beheld the face of his Savior in a little child, and the world had nothing left to offer him. He was ready to die happy.

The occasion for today is the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord. It's one of those liturgical celebrations that we don't observe every year, but only when February 2 happens to fall on a Sunday. Today is the fortieth day after Christmas. And it was on the fortieth day after Jesus was born that Joseph and Mary took him to the temple in Jerusalem for the first time.

There is some Old Testament background to this. You can read about it in Leviticus 12. The LORD commanded that when a woman gives birth, she would be unclean for a certain amount of time. In the case of giving birth to a male child, there was a time of purification lasting forty days, at the end of which she was required to make a sacrifice.

It's important to clarify here that the ritual classification of a person as unclean was not a moral judgment on the person, and it did not mean that they had sinned in some way. Giving birth to a child is a noble and virtuous act. But the classification of uncleanness reminds us of death. We are dying, and this whole world is not the way it is supposed to be. We remember that childbirth became painful because of the fall into sin (Gen. 3:16). So the LORD instituted this law that every Israelite woman must go through a ritual of purification and sacrifice after giving birth.

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There's a little tidbit here that reveals to us that Joseph and Mary were poor. When the LORD instituted this sacrifice, he commanded that the mother bring a year-old lamb as a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtledove as a sin offering (Lev. 12:6). That was the typical sacrifice: one lamb and one bird. But the Lord made an exception for people who could not afford a lamb. They could just bring another pigeon or turtledove instead (Lev. 12:8). And that's what Luke says Joseph and Mary did, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" (2:24). So we had a little clue toward this at Jesus' birth, when he was laid in a manger. But here we have confirmation of their poverty. Joseph and Mary could not afford to purchase a lamb for the sacrifice. When you think about it though, it's actually quite fitting, because Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). They brought a sacrifice of far more worth. So this was like the presentation of Jesus before his sacrifice, which would take place some thirty years later.

But they were still required to bring the birds for the sacrifice. There were no exceptions, not even for Mary. The child she bore was without sin, but he was still born under the Law, because he came to redeem us from the curse of the Law (Gal. 4:4-5). Law, true law, is powerful and unchanging. Even when Jesus came, he didn't live by different laws. He subjected himself to the same laws the rest of us are subject to. As God, he is the true Law-giver. If anyone would have authority over Law, it would be him. But he subjected himself to the laws he had commanded, so that he could fulfill those laws in our place.

I want us to think a little bit about this word "law." What does it mean that something is a law? It means that it's unavoidable, immovable, and unchangeable. We might not always think this way as Americans, because, as a self-governing people, we kind of just make our own laws. We have different laws from one state to another, and our laws are changing all the time, or, at least, it seems that way. We live as if popular opinion determines law. That's really an atheistic way to live. It makes ourselves out to be God. Our founders did not think this way, nor did the ancestors of their political thought in Britain. They gave much more attention to natural law. That is, there are natural moral laws in the universe, which are set by God. So their task was not to invent laws, but to recognize and discern those laws that are natural to the universe and codify them for use in our nation.

It's similar to the way scientists talk about the laws of physics and such. They didn't all get together to debate the merits of gravity or thermodynamics and decide to enact those laws. Instead, their task was to discover those laws and explain them. And when they can determine that something is just the way the universe functions, they call it a law. They discover laws, but they do not invent them. The moral universe is the same way. This is the way our God created the universe. Thinking that we can decide what is right or wrong is about as stupid as thinking that we can invent or abolish gravity.

I don't know if we'll ever recover this way of political thought, and that's not my point. But for us, as Christians, we should recognize the unavoidable, immovable, and unchanging nature of God's Law. We don't get to make it up as we go in order to suit our desires. What God says is right is right. What God says is wrong is wrong. And when we violate his commandments, something will probably go badly for us or another person affected by our actions. It's not that he punishes us in this life for our sins. But his commandments are like the programming for the universe. It's the way his creation is supposed to function. So when we violate his commandments, and it could be dishonoring our parents, murdering or causing bodily harm to another person, committing adultery, stealing, lying, deceiving, or anything else. When we violate those commandments, it will likely cause something to not work right. It will hurt us or another person. It can damage relationships. That's just the nature of law. I had a professor in

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seminary who would say, “We don’t really break God’s Law. No one can break God’s Law. But we break ourselves against his Law.”

And because we have all violated God’s commandments, because we have all sinned, we are guilty and deserving of God’s condemnation. That, also, is the nature of Law. When we break it, we are rightly called “law-breakers.” And we deserve his punishment. But God does not desire to punish you. He does not want to condemn you. God is just, and God is love. So he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to be born under the Law to redeem us from the curse of the Law. That’s the big thing we see in this text. We see that Jesus was born under the Law in order to fulfill it for us, so that when he was killed some thirty years later, he would be the perfect and willing sacrifice for all of our sins.

This is what we read about in the epistle lesson from Hebrews 2:

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. ... Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:14-15, 17).

Jesus became as we are in every way, except without sin, so that he could make propitiation for our sins. That means that he could be the substitutionary sacrifice in our place. God justly punished all the sins of the world in Jesus. And Jesus desired this, because he loves you. He and the Father shared the same will to save you through the innocent suffering and death of Jesus. And just as Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, you can be certain that he will also raise you from the dead at his return. He has defeated death. He stripped sin of its power by his own death. So death could not hold him, and it cannot hold you.

This is what Simeon said about Jesus. “This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel” (2:34). And it’s not just for the Israelites, but for all the nations (2:32). This would be painful. Simeon’s words are filled with hope and joy, but they are also ominous. He even warns Mary that a sword would pierce through her own soul. And we think of the great anguish she must have experienced at the foot of the cross. No parent should have to watch their child die. But God the Father knows what this is like. And Mary watched as her son died. And it’s not just that he died, but he was hated and despised on that cross. That must have felt like a sword cutting through her heart. Many fell in their hatred of Jesus. But the ultimate purpose was for many to rise. The purpose was for you to rise.

That’s what Simeon saw when he looked into the face of his forty-day-old Savior. And this filled him with great joy. I’m going to assume, and I think this is a safe assumption, it was the greatest joy he had ever experienced in life. He declared that he could now die happy. “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.” His life was complete.

This prayer of Simeon’s is often used by Christians as a thanksgiving following the Lord’s Supper. Because, here Jesus gives to us his precious body and blood. And with it we receive everything he won for us in the sacrifice of his body and blood: forgiveness, life, and everlasting salvation. You can depart in peace, knowing that Jesus has made peace between you and God by the blood of his cross.

This is what makes our lives complete: knowing that we have a Savior who has passed through death for us and risen victorious on the other side. Because now we know that he can lead us through it as well and bring us into the perfect joy of his new creation.

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You don't have to get everything you can out of this life. You can suffer heartbreak. Your dreams can go unfulfilled. You don't have to experience everything on your "bucket list." You need not fear death. For when your hour of death shall come, whenever that may be, your heavenly Father will take you from this world of sorrow to himself in heaven. You can depart in peace, knowing that Jesus has made peace between you and God by the blood of his cross. Amen.

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