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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
The Purification of Mary and Presentation of Our Lord
Saturday, February 1st, 2020
Sunday, February 2nd, 2020

Sermon: The Gift that Keeps on Giving
Text: Luke 2:22-40

Focus: God drew near to us in the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Light of the World.

Function: That they would shine the light of Christ in Castle Rock.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts..." (SC, 3rd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. Does last Christmas seem like a long-forgotten dream to you? It has been 40 days since we gathered to sing "Silent Night" by candlelight and celebrate our Savior's birth. It was almost 6 weeks ago that we tore open our packages on Christmas morning and drank our holiday cheer.

But now the Christmas decorations are put away. We've returned to the store the clothes that Grandma sent in the wrong size. The last of the holiday treats have been tossed in the trash (but that's the way the cookie crumbles!). Christmas is done and gone. (*Aside:* Unless you are my son Michael, who excitedly declares whenever it snows, "Daddy, it's *Christmas* again!") So instead of dreaming for a white Christmas, we can't wait for the snow to go and the spring flowers to come. We wonder, "Will the groundhog see his shadow today?"

We may be over and done with Christmas until next winter, but the Church is not done with the baby Jesus. While for many Americans February 2nd is Groundhog Day, the Church marches to a different drum and keeps a different calendar. For us this is the Feast of the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord. That's quite a mouthful to say, but that's because there's an awful lot going on in today's Gospel lesson.

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First let's discuss the purification of Mary. In ancient Israel God commanded that after a woman gave birth to a child, she had to undergo a period of time during which she was regarded as ceremonially "unclean" (Lev. 12:1-8; Lev. 15:19ff). As a result, she could not participate in public life or go to offer sacrifice in the Temple. For the birth of a boy, this unclean state lasted 40 days; for a girl, it was 60 days. During the time of her impurity, anything she touched or sat on became unclean—and so did anybody who came into contact with the dishes or furniture she touched. Her husband was not even allowed to sleep with her.¹

So when the time came for Mary's ritual cleansing, she traveled with Joseph and baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem. This was 40 days after Jesus' birth. So if you add 40 days to December 25th, you get February 2nd—thus the Purification of Mary and Presentation of Our Lord.

But there's more going on. God had given another law that said every firstborn son was dedicated to the Lord (cf. Ex. 13:2):

“When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem” (Ex. 13:11-13).

Every firstborn male, be it animal or human, belonged to the Lord. Animals had to be sacrificed, but a baby boy could be redeemed by a lamb, or, if the family was too poor, the mother could sacrifice a pair of pigeons or doves instead (Lev. 12:8).

The Holy Family faithfully kept God's Law. Joseph was a “just”—or righteous—man (Matt. 1:19). He and Mary were very careful to do everything for Jesus required by the Law

¹ John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 267.

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(Luke 2:27). Truly, Jesus did not come to abolish or destroy the Law, but to fulfill it in order that he could be the perfect sacrifice for our sin (cf. Matt. 5:17).

So the Holy Family journeyed to Jerusalem to make purification for Mary and to present Jesus to the Lord. However, they did not offer a lamb to redeem Jesus. Instead they sacrificed a pair of pigeons. Why? For two reasons: first, to show that the Holy Family was indeed poor before the later visit of the magi (further confirmation that the so-called “wise men” were not present at the stable on the night of Jesus’ birth and have no place in our Nativity displays).

That the Holy Family had to offer birds proves that Jesus was born lowly in poverty. When he came down from heaven to take on human flesh, he gave up the riches and power of heaven and became “nothing” (Phil. 2:5-8), a nobody from the perspective of the world. Indeed, during his later ministry, Jesus depended on the hospitality of other people to find a place to stay: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). During his adult ministry, Jesus was homeless. He literally gave up *everything* for you, including all earthly comforts, so that he could be your Savior. Ultimately, he died on the cross and gave his *life* for you.

And that is the second reason why Jesus’ parents did not redeem him with a lamb. Jesus *is* the Redeemer. He cannot be redeemed. “The Son of Man came... to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28). Jesus is the one who does the redeeming. He is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Why offer a lamb to redeem Jesus when he himself is the Lamb who was slain?

So even though we may be tempted not to pay attention to the events happening on the fortieth day of Jesus’ little life, quite a lot is going on in our Gospel reading! God’s plan of salvation for us continues to unfold as he “fleshes out” everything accomplished by Jesus. Jesus

is the gift who keeps on giving! Every breath he drew, every heartbeat, had purposeful intent to redeem *us* and bring us back to God.

That's why Simeon and Anna got so excited and rejoiced when they saw baby Jesus enter the Temple. Simeon was a faithful believer ("righteous and devout") who was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25). God told him he would not die until he beheld Messiah with his own two eyes. Anna was a prophetess and a widow who fasted and prayed night and day in the Temple, never departing from the Lord's presence, just like the sparrow in our Psalm that makes her nest in God's house (cf. Ps. 84:2-3). "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts!" (Ps. 84:1). How lovely is the Lord Jesus Christ, the One in whom God's glory dwells, and the one who took on flesh to dwell among us (John 1:14, 18)!

When Simeon saw the little Lord Jesus, he was filled with the Spirit, took the baby in his arms, and broke into song. It just occurred to me this past week that the Christmas story *is* a musical. Everywhere you look in the first two chapters of Luke's Gospel, people are bursting out into song and dance: Mary, Zechariah, the Christmas angels, and Simeon. Four of the Church's wonderful liturgical songs, known as canticles, are here: the *Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, *Gloria in Excelsis*, and the *Nunc Dimittis*. Today we hear the *Nunc Dimittis*, which we usually sing during Lent after we finish the Communion distribution: "Lord, now lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace according to Thy Word..." (*TLH*).

Simeon saw the Lord's salvation, just as God promised, because he held in his arms the *Savior* Jesus, the One who would bring light into the dark places of the world because he *is* the Light of the World (Luke 2:30-32; John 9:5). And the darkness cannot overcome him (John 1:5).

The Epiphany season is all about light. That's what the word epiphany means: to shine light on something. Today's Gospel shines light on the baby Jesus who brings salvation to

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everyone who believes and receives his name. But our congregation is also Epiphany, and this is *our* job: to shine the light of Christ in Castle Rock. Simeon carried Christ in his arms. We carry Christ's name on our tongues, his Word in our hearts, the Good News in our feet. And just as Anna the prophetess gave thanks to God and told everyone about Jesus (Luke 2:38), so we are called to shine forth with the love and mercy of Christ.

“*You* are the light of the world...,” Jesus will say in next week’s Gospel lesson. “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14, 16). Shine the light of Christ in Castle Rock by loving and serving your neighbors and by telling everyone what he has done: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Salvation comes for those who watch and wait for Christ. Truly, he is the gift that keeps on giving. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.