
The Presentation of Jesus

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 2 February 2025

Malachi 3:1-4 • Hebrews 2:14-18 • Luke 2:22-40



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is brought to the temple shortly after birth by his parents, Mary and Joseph. It is the first time he has been in the temple; it will not be the last. As a faithful Jew, he will visit the temple many times in his life. We saw a few weeks back how he got left behind at the temple on one of his family's visits to Jerusalem, and how he amazed the elders with the answers to their questions, though he was only 12 years old. He will continue to go up to Jerusalem for the yearly festivals. In a most memorable visit, he clears the temple of the moneychangers and sellers of sacrificial animals; and later prophesies the destruction of the temple, to his disciples' amazement.

But today he is carried in the arms of his mother, who was required by the law of Moses to offer a sacrifice to complete her rite of purification following

childbirth. Joseph attends with her, presumably because he was present at the birth. The birth of a boy caused the mother to be ceremonially unclean for 41 days. During this period, the mother is secluded at home and cannot travel, so this would have been the first time out for Mary after Jesus' birth. This uncleanness and seclusion has nothing to do with a judgment of sin, for procreation is a gift of God. It is instead a wise requirement to give the mother and especially the new child a chance at a healthy start in life, by minimising the risks of outside infection. This practice has similarly been followed, I believe, by most societies. Women tend not to take their newborn babies out in public for a few months after birth, for the baby's own protection; though this has changed a bit in recent years, I've noticed. Following this period, and the required temple sacrifice, the Jewish woman regained her status as a full member of society and is able to go about her normal life.

The details of this passage suggest that Jesus was a normal Jewish baby, and that is important for us to remember. Because he grew up just like other boys of his time — because he was fully human, as well as fully divine — we are able to relate to him and know him as our brother. Luke often takes pains to show the human qualities of Jesus, for that reason. He was a normal baby, and he was a normal Jew, whose parents followed all the laws of Moses — in other words, they followed God, and showed their faith by their actions. The value of the laws of Moses is primarily in demonstrating the faith of those who follow them. What I have said about the wisdom of seclusion following childbirth is true, but Mary didn't do it for that reason: she did it to give God glory. So it was with all the laws of Moses, such as the prohibitions against certain foods. They made sense on the practical level, but their worth is shown in the obedience to God they represent. In return for their faith, God protected them through the practical protection from harm the laws gave.

We are not subject to such purity laws today. Jesus brought in a new way to worship God, through faith, not actions. We all have a connection to God through Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit. The sacrifices of animals are no longer necessary — what God wants is the sacrifice of ourselves, our spirits, in devotion to God. But our actions are important. We can still please God through the things that we do. That has not changed. Remember Jesus' words, when he called a little child to him:

‘Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.’
(Matthew 18:3-5)

The good things we do in Jesus' name, in humility, are pleasing to Jesus.

At the temple, the young family meets a man named Simeon, a faithful servant of God who has been waiting for the appearance of the Messiah. His words to them, known as the Song of Simeon and familiar to anyone who has ever sung in a church choir, tell of his patience in waiting for the word of God to be revealed. He is a true prophet, to whom God has revealed a bit of God's plan for humanity. He approaches the young family and tells them what God has told him:

This child is chosen by God for the destruction and the salvation of many in Israel. He will be a sign from God which many people will speak against and so reveal their secret thoughts. (Luke 2:34-35)

Mary would have put this together with all the other amazing information she has been receiving the last few months. It is a true prophecy, as we see in the Gospels. Jesus does indeed bring division; or rather, he shows up the division which already exists, between those like the Pharisees, who followed the letter of the law but betrayed its spirit, and those like Mary and Zacchaeus, who had true faith. Like all deceivers, the scribes and Pharisees did not like to have their true intentions revealed; but Jesus is the refining fire of the Malachi passage, who will separate the truly faithful from the pretenders. Jesus does this through his preaching and his actions, such as in clearing the temple; and the ultimate division between salvation and destruction will come with his final human act, when he willingly submits to death on the cross.

Simeon brings a personal message to Mary as well: "Sorrow, like a sharp sword, will break your own heart." It is a measure of God's love that even in this moment of revelation of the great events to come, God shows his care for the woman Mary. As the years go by and Mary sees Jesus drawing away from her in order to follow his Father's plan, she will experience pain and heartache; and yet God will be with her to comfort her in all that happens.

When we look at a passage like this one from Luke, we see the wonderful care and love of our God. Mary and the baby Jesus have been protected by God's law compelling them to stay home for those first critical weeks of the baby's life. God has provided for Simeon, giving him a glimpse of the future and soon after this day, we presume, will take him to his eternal glory. The widow and prophet Anna, too, is given knowledge and consolation. Mary, although destined for sorrow and heartbreak, is the chosen of God, and will be comforted. And above all, God's people will see the opening of heaven and the chance of eternal life through Jesus' mission, death and resurrection. Thanks be to God for all his love. Amen.