

Sermon for the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord (Candlemas)

February 2, 2011 (transferred to February 1)

Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-32

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Today we celebrate the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord in the temple. In Eastern Christianity this day is known as the Meeting of Our Lord. In the West it has also traditionally been known as Candlemas, because on this day in the church year, candles were blessed for use throughout the year, lit and carried in procession. It was a celebration of light in the midst of the cold, dark depths of winter when people in the northern hemisphere longed for more daylight. This celebration of light points us to Christ, who is Himself the Light of the world, the one who Simeon said would be *“a light for revelation to the Gentiles.”* For our Lord Christ had come to disperse something far worse and more depressing than physical darkness; He came to disperse the darkness of sin and death, bringing salvation to all people.

40 days after His birth, Jesus is continuing His obedient work for our salvation. According to Leviticus 12, women were considered to be unclean for 40 days after the birth of a male child. It was 80 days for a female child (apparently, God wasn't too concerned about His law being politically correct). This confesses to us that all are born sinful and this is why a cleansing must take place (the Israelites obviously were not Baptists). The birth of a little sinner defiles the mother, who is herself a sinner. Yet, if Jesus is born without sin, then why does Mary need to be purified? That question is answered in our epistle reading from Hebrews 2: *“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same things...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.”* Jesus does this for us, in our place.

The prophet Malachi said that the Lord would *“suddenly come to His temple.”* Here we have once instance of that, the second one (His circumcision being the first), and there will be more. Christ shows up in fulfillment of the Law. The first born son is redeemed – He who was born to redeem the world. While He had no need to be redeemed, He obediently comes to His own temple to be redeemed as the first born Son to open the womb. The Word by whom the heavens and the earth were created is born into a family so poor, that it can only offer the lowliest sacrifice allowed – two turtledoves, for His mother's unnecessary purification for His miraculous, sinless birth. While a lamb would have been part of the standard offering, Jesus Himself will stand in for that offering as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The sacrifice is offered, the blood is shed, for children are sinners from birth and sin requires the shedding of blood, and just as Jesus stands in our place here at the temple, he will do so again when He hangs on the cross as the atoning sacrifice, the propitiation for all our sins. This sacrifice made for the purification of Mary shows that Christ takes upon Himself condemnation to death, though the Law has no claim on Him. *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...”* (Gal. 3:13) Here at the age of 40 days, He is a curse for us.

And as the little Lord Jesus is brought to the temple by his parents, there is one who recognizes Him for who He is. While the couple with the little child probably appeared no different from any other Jewish couple bringing their child to the temple, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus is recognized by Simeon, who is often depicted as an old man. Simeon is the hope of the faithful remnant of Israel all rolled up into one man, the stand-in for all Old Testament believers who awaited the "*consolation of Israel*," the coming of the Messiah, who would bring salvation. Simeon was righteous and devout, one who heard and trusted in the Word of Lord, who loved the habitation of His house and the place where His glory dwelt. And Simeon's hope was not in vain, for the Holy Spirit had promised old Simeon that he would not die without seeing the Christ. And here, in an incident that probably lasted no more than a few minutes, is the culminating moment of Simeon's entire life – for he holds his Creator and Savior in his own arms.

Imagine holding in your very arms the Word made flesh, holding in your arms the very one who has held you in His arms from before you were even born! Apart from the Word of the Holy Spirit, Simeon wouldn't have even known who he had in his arms, but that Word made all the difference. He confessed that his eyes have seen the Lord's salvation, the light for the Gentiles, the crowning glory, the fulfillment of the purpose of Israel. All this was wrapped up in this little Child he held in his arms. No wonder he could depart in peace! What else was there after this? Nothing else in this life could surpass what Simeon beheld here. He was ready to die! And so it is for us as well.

By His Word, our Lord has told us where to find salvation. Just as it was for Simeon, He is found where He has told us He would be – in the temple of His own body, in that very flesh and blood that He took upon Himself for us and for our salvation – that's where we find Him still. We can seek in vain for him in our own poisoned wisdom, in our own sin-blackened hearts, in our death reeking, worthless words. We will not find Him in those things. Neither will we find Him by our own sight – without the Holy Spirit, without the revelation of the Word, Simeon would not have known who that little boy was, and neither would we. Apart from the Lord and what He reveals, all our light is darkness. This Child alone is the Light for revelation to all people. He is the world's only true Light. All else is darkness, misery, vanity and death. But the Light of His Gospel disperses the entire darkness of the devil, along with the drab sin and death it brings.

Holding this Child, beholding Him in the flesh is our only preparation to truly depart in peace. Simeon confessed that he was ready to depart after holding Jesus. And just like Simeon, Jesus is present for us where He promised to be, so that we may depart in peace as well. As Simeon held Jesus, Jesus was holding Simeon in His salvation, just as He holds each one of us – keeping and preserving us in the Faith as we receive Him in His very Body and Blood. The words of Simeon, the *Nunc Dimittis*, are such appropriate words to sing after receiving Holy Communion, for there the Lord has put us at peace – with Him and with one another – in the forgiveness of sins He earned for us, by becoming a curse for us, fulfilling the Law for us, dying for us and rising again so that in Him we might have eternal life. Here at the altar, our eyes see His salvation, we receive Him, and we are able to depart from the altar at peace. And in receiving Him, we are not only able to leave this altar in peace, but we also have all that we need to leave this life in peace and live with Him forever in His glorious presence. This is your consolation in Christ. Amen.