

Luke 2:22-40
First Sunday after Christmas
December 31, 2023

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

Our text, the Presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple, beginning, “When the time came for the purification according to the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The meditations of the Nativity of our Lord so often focus on Christ defeating sin by going from the wood of the manger to the wood of the cross that we sometimes forget how essential is His righteousness to his “*going*.” Christ saves us not only by His sacrifice, but by His righteousness. What good is his sacrifice if he offers himself up as a spotted, filthy, unrighteous lamb? If the *spotless* Lamb is to be offered, then the Lamb is not only to be spotless in nature, but therefore also in conduct.

Thus, from the very earliest days, the infant Lord is living His righteousness, having subjected himself to His own Law that he might fulfill it for our sakes. Notice how prominent this is in St Paul’s famous description of the Lord’s incarnation: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under

the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons... So you are no longer a slave, but a son.”

Notice, for anyone powerless in the face of the Law, the Law is seen as a slaveholder, a terrible taskmaster. But Jesus came in His righteousness, not to be enslaved by the Law (for the Law’s true divine relationship with man is one of holy teacher, not loveless taskmaster, but – after the Fall – it takes the holy and pure God-man to show that true relationship)... Jesus came not to be enslaved by the Law, but to keep it, to honor it, to fulfill it in perfect righteousness for our sakes. And that begins even in His infancy.

Consider the centrality of this truth: The very first verse in Luke’s gospel following the narrative of Christmas night speaks of the Law of Moses, that the time came for Mary and Joseph to ensure the holy child was presented to the Lord according to the Old Covenant’s Law. And, seventeen verses later, all of the rejoicing of Simeon and Anna is bookended with another reminder that all of this scene is in the context of the holy Law being honored: “And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.”

Notice, in fact, the detail that Luke leaves out: he doesn’t even mention the visit of the Magi. The Magi came to Bethlehem,

well after these early days of the Law of Purification, and (of course) when the Magi came to Bethlehem, Jesus was still in Bethlehem... and after the Magi left, Joseph hurried the family to Egypt... and after Herod died, *then* Joseph returned the family to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. Luke doesn't even record that episode with the Magi – just says the family returned to Nazareth! It's as if he says, "Matthew has already mentioned that, to remind the Jews Christ also came for the Gentiles and to fulfill prophecies. But, as I record the Gospel with the gentiles steeped in sin" (it's as if Luke says), "what needs to be recorded is the *righteousness* of this child"... this one who was born under the law to redeem those who – whether they'll admit it or not – were slaves under the law... The Christ was born for us slaves, born under the law to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons.

So, Christ came and became flesh for us to go to the cross as the One who fulfilled the Law for our sakes. Consider how the prophet Isaiah hints at this in the Old Testament – the verse being chosen for the bulletin cover: "The Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up." Indeed, we speak of Christ *coming into* the world, but consider the great truth that his being planted here in the womb of the virgin and then proceeding forth out of the womb of the virgin means that God is causing Christ's

righteousness and praise of the Father to sprout up from what was a world barren of righteousness and proper praise of God. Yes, not just righteousness... but when the infant Child keeps the Law of God, it is to God's praise that the holy Law is finally being kept as it ought. Kept, not only in perfect obedience and fulfillment of the Law, but also in the perfect joy of the Child's perfect heart and His perfect heart's perfect desire to do the Father's will, just as Jesus would say in childhood, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house (about my Father's business, doing his will)?" ...and, in adulthood, he would say, "I came down from heaven to do the will of Him who sent me." That is his fervent – perfect – desire and joy, even in infancy, so that it is not just Mary and Joseph bringing a helpless, indifferent child to their purification, but Mary and Joseph carrying the holy Infant who, in His perfection, eagerly desires to praise the Father in the perfect obedience to the Law. This is what we mean when we say that Christ "fulfilled the Law for our sakes."

Now, consider that for a moment more: when saying "Christ fulfilled the Law for our sakes," we must not interpret that to mean we now are free to not care about God's commandments. That's sometimes how it's interpreted, isn't it: "Jesus fulfilled the Law for me; now I can roam free in sin." No, Jesus fulfilled the Law to be the perfect substitute, so that the

Law's perfection would no longer be a threat to us and – with a clear conscience - we learn to rejoice in living in it. Simeon did not sing of how Christ had 'freed him from the law,' but rather, "In accord with your Word" Simeon knew that He was at peace with God. In accord with God's promises in the coming Christ *and* in accord with the law's description of the righteous harmony between God and man. In Christ's righteousness, Simeon could now depart in peace (εἰρήνῃ – in unity) with God. "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace/unity. For mine eyes have seen your salvation." A salvation both in Christ being *the sacrifice*, but also in being *him who unites us – by His righteousness* – to God's holy will and desire.

The light for revelation to the Gentiles is not merely a light that shows us we are saved, but also shows us the way of God. Of course, the reverse is just as importantly true: The light for revelation to the Gentiles is not merely that we are shown the way of God (as if the blueprint to follow unto salvation ourselves) but also reveals to us that we are saved – justification complete in the Messiah long-promised, now present – we're saved by His righteousness and His pending sacrifice, saved to be united with God's people Israel – that Jew and Gentile alike may be united in the Church, redeemed to be people of God, rejoicing as prophesied in our Old Testament reading: "I will greatly rejoice in

the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.”

It's in that joy – the redemption prepared for all people, the salvation by God's grace in the offering up of His own righteous substitute (but *redemption* meaning a buying back into righteousness, not 'declaring righteous' merely to allow us to wallow in unrighteousness) – it's in that joy of the ransomed now redeemed to again be God's people – it's in that joy that Simeon may depart this life in peace: one with God, declared righteous in Christ Jesus, to be perfected in righteousness when he leaves Old Adam to death and is raised in perfection on the day of the resurrection of all flesh.

It's in that same joy that Anna may sing of God's praises, thanking Him and speaking of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption – the buying back into unity with the righteous God – the redemption of Jerusalem.

It's in that same joy you may leave the Supper of the Lord with the same song as Simeon and the same praise as Anna. After all, you are now one with them in the Faith, even as we all eventually find ourselves to be their kindred spirits in the increasing years of anticipation for God's deliverance.

That's the truth that defines our sustenance at the Supper, isn't it? ... that we are waiting for Christ to visibly manifest himself in the flesh just as they were waiting for Christ to visibly manifest himself in the flesh. We may be awaiting the second coming, while they were awaiting the first coming... but we are equally awaiting his coming. So, we may find ourselves envious of Simeon, who could die with visible certainty. We may find ourselves envious of Anna, whose praises could no longer be by faith but by sight.

But you leave with the same divine truth that they did. What did they see but the humility of a child? What do you see but the humility of bread and wine? They were no different than you in having to see through the veil of the Lord's promises. And yet, Simeon could sing of *seeing according to the Lord's Word*. Not according to rationalism's word, or the world's word, but according to the Lord's Word... and all the promises therein! Likewise, you see the same Christ, in the same flesh and blood *in accord with the Lord's Word and all the promises therein*. According to rationalism, it's mere bread and wine. According to the world's word, it's a mere religious custom. According to Simeon and Anna, you might as well be kneeling at the rail, passing an infant from one set of arms to the next and gazing at

him with all the joy and wonder of Simeon's and Anna's long expectation finally fulfilled.

But, of course, you need not put your faith in a child and still-pending promises. The only promise you're still awaiting is the resurrection and the final judgment! Compare that to Simeon and Anna who, in faith, assumed (correctly) that with the birth of the child meant a future death upon the cross, a future Easter morning empty tomb, a future ascension into glory, a future coming again for the resurrection of all flesh. They had so much still to wait for; and yet, they could depart in peace because Christ had become flesh... so the rest had to take place.

In a position of expectation for far fewer promises yet to be fulfilled, you depart from the Table each Sunday knowing how many of the promises have already been fulfilled. Not only was Christ born into the world, but He *did* succeed in living out perfect righteousness and, in that perfect righteousness. He *did* die the perfect death that atones for all sins. Furthermore, He *did* rise again on the third day, *did* ascend into heaven having instituted His ongoing care for the Church in Word and Sacraments, and thus did leave you His testament of His very flesh and blood in the Sacrament, that you may take him up just as tangibly as did Simeon of old... even if it means that, with Simeon, you have to

wait for that final promise to still be fulfilled – Christ *will* come again.

Until then, all of daily life unto our dying breath, may be lived in peace – that we are in unity with God because of the Lord’s Christ, we’re perfectly justified by the righteous substitute, to be His people who love His holy will and desire to live out in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

Thus, as Simeon and Anna received a glimpse of the Lord’s Christ, looking upon that child and seeing the much deeper truth, so look upon the bread and wine and see it according to God’s Word: “This is my body, this is my blood” – and therein proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes again – “In this feast is the One who was appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, as a sign to be opposed, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” – and, as your heart is therefore revealed in the confession of this Supper: take, eat; take, drink. That you may each day *live*, and each day be prepared to *die*, in peace with God according to His Word.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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