

The Festival of the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of our Lord
2 February, Anno Domini 2025
St. Luke 2:22-32

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

Children of God,

It isn't often that we have the opportunity to observe this festival of the Church Year. But the significance of these events is highlighted by the fact that the Church has seen fit to make sure that we hear these events of the life of Christ twice by appointing Luke's account for this day as well as the First Sunday after Christmas.

Why do these events matter so much? Aren't these just Old Testament rituals that don't have anything to do with us today? Or worse, as some modern scholars argue, aren't these just further evidence that the Jews really saw women as inferior? Why should Mary need to be purified? Did she do something wrong? Did she sin by giving birth to a child?

We can be certain that if Mary's ritual purification wasn't important or if the presentation of our Lord didn't have something to do with our salvation, then the Holy Spirit wouldn't have seen fit to inspire St. Luke to describe either event in His account of Jesus' life. And if the Holy Spirit deemed it of such importance, we should absolutely consider it important enough to ponder and take the time and effort to understand and even celebrate by receiving the benefits.

Either of these events on their own, the purification and the presentation, have a great deal to teach us about The Lord and what He in mercy has done for us. Yet, the very fact that they occur at the same time teaches us even more.

According to God's own direction, found in Leviticus 12, a woman was to be considered unclean after giving birth to a child. We don't have time today to get into all the details of why, but suffice it to say that being unclean essentially meant that the new mother was quarantined from normal life at home and, more importantly, from participation in the Israelites' life in the temple. It was just one of the many reminders, in this case especially for the new mother, but also for the entire family and community of the separation between man and God brought about by our sin. God was strict about keeping what is unclean and unholy separate from that which is clean and holy. Light has no fellowship with darkness. You cannot eat at both the table of demons and the table of the Lord.

We are impure and unholy on account of our sin. We are separated from God as we indulge unkind and hurtful thoughts. We make our mouths filthy with coarse talk, foolish joking, and slandering of our neighbor. We assault our own eyes with vulgar images which are then painted in the walls of our minds. We allow floods of false teaching to pour into our ears and draw our hearts away from the truth of God's Word. We lash out against our neighbor over petty and imagined offenses. We nonchalantly despise God by not daily hearing His Word and calling upon Him at all times for all things. Unclean is a drastic understatement when it comes to our condition before our God and Father. Filthy, disgusting, or loathsome might be more accurate. You are either clean or you are not. There is no in between, no almost clean or just a little dirty. We cannot be mindful enough of the gulf between the holiness of God and the unholiness of man because it is precisely that gulf that brings baby Jesus into the temple forty days after His birth.

Every Israelite mother, made unclean through birth, was also graciously shown the way in which she would be purified, made holy again and received again into God's gracious presence. And, as always, it was through sacrifice, through the shedding of blood. Bringing the prescribed animals for burnt offerings and sin offerings to the priest, the new mother was cleansed and received back into gracious presence of God. Again, because God had provided a way for that to happen.

Mary, long viewed as the type, the picture of the whole Christian Church, went to the temple to meet the demands of the Law, to be made clean, to offer the sacrifices appointed by God. Her sin had separated her from God and she longed for restoration. She found life and hope in God's promise that through the blood of the turtledoves, because she was poor, God would be merciful to her and cleanse her. God promised His daughters that the blood of their sacrifices would suffice until the one sacrifice, the Lamb of God, would shed His Blood and cleanse them once and for all.

But Mary wasn't the only one who went to the temple that day. In her arms she carried her newborn son, the Promised Seed, the Son of the Most High God, the one who wouldn't just do the Law, but fulfill it, complete it, and bring it's judgment to an end. According to the Law, "whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast", was consecrated to The Lord. This Law was to serve as a reminder to God's people that their firstborn had been spared on the night of the Passover, the night when the Angel of Death claimed the lives of every Egyptian firstborn but passed over the Israelite households that bore the mark of the lamb's blood. And while The Lord rightfully laid claim to the children of Israel, even still, He provided a way and even commanded that the Israelites redeemed their children, bought them back from The Lord. And guess how that happened - by sacrifice of a lamb, a substitute.

Notice, however, that in Jesus' case, no substitute was offered. No lamb was offered. There would be no buying back of Jesus from the service of God, no redeeming the Redeemer. His entire life would be one of serving God, keeping perfectly every command and every word of His Father, everything our life isn't. He remained spotless and perfectly clean according to the Law. He would love His neighbor, us, and serve us so completely and perfectly that He would lay down His life to redeem ours from judgment and eternal death. Mary and Joseph brought to the temple that day the Lamb of God who would be offered to buy back Mary, Joseph, you, me and the whole world. God the Father offered His eternally appointed spotless Lamb, His Son, to buy back Israel, His chosen people, all who call upon the Triune God in faith, repenting of their sin and seeking His mercy and forgiveness. The Son of God now received in joy by faithful Simeon and Anna, would be cast back out of the temple and sacrificed on the cross to atone for the sins of the whole world, to purify our consciences and make them clean again. He would bear our guilt and our shame. His innocence is the pleasing aroma that set aside God's wrath and brings us back into the gracious presence of God.

That same Lamb is in our midst today, and with our eyes, we see the salvation God has prepared before the face of all people - Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, rich and poor. Though we come bearing the uncleanness of our sinful hearts, the Son of God comes into our midst to present Himself to us as Savior and to buy us back, to purge us and declare us forgiven, clean, holy, and restored to the congregation of saints. He was obedient to everything the Law demanded of you so that you might be pardoned for your disobedience, cleansed of your uncleanness, restored from your separation. No more sacrifices to offer. No more lambs or pigeons or turtledoves. Only Jesus, who has come to redeem you so that you may depart from this communion table, from this temple, and from this life in peace, forgiven and purified. Depart in peace.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.