

Grace Church of West Feliciana Parish
Feast of The Presentation of Our Lord
Saint Francisville, LA
2 February 2020

Luke 2:22-40

Today in America we will engage in an extravagant ritual. Millions will gather around television sets to watch the St. Francisco 49's and the Kansas City Chiefs engage in battle. Led by two worthy generals, these armies will seek to demolish the enemy; claim victory for their cities and states; and gift many of the citizens of those states, now dispersed around the world, with the pride of home they need. And as we watch these two armies at battle from the comfort of our couches, in air-conditioned rooms and well-built homes, we will consume gallons of beer and mountains of potato chips and finger foods of all types, flavors and sizes. And just for one day, the piles of bills at the dining room table will be forgotten, the conflicts with neighbors or loved ones will not consume our attention, the last diagnosis from our doctors will not seem as hopeless or terrifying. Today, an annual ritual will disrupt our mundane lives. Today won't be life as usual, whether you like football or not. This will be a day consecrated to the NFL and Americans will spend billions of dollars enjoying this annual ritual.

The evangelist Luke wants us to know that Jesus also celebrated rituals. He was a good Jew and as a good Jew from a good Jewish family, Jesus celebrated the religious festivals and rituals of Israel. Today we see Jesus celebrating the ritual of the presentation at the Temple, a bit later in chapter 2 we will see the family come to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover, as "it was their custom", throughout the Gospel we will see Jesus celebrate every Jewish festival known to First Century Palestinians.

The celebration of religious festivals is extremely important for the Jewish people. Through these feasts they remember how God has acted to deliver and protect them throughout their history. These festivals mark religious and civil history and remind the people that God cares deeply for them. God is not an absentee landlord. He walks among them, he blesses every day, he protects them and loves them from the planting to the gathering of the harvest, from birth to death, from beginning to end. God's presence consecrates their daily lives. Daily rituals remind the people of God that the Lord is in charge of their existence, that everything that is and everything they have are gifts from the Lord of life and that gratitude and joyful remembrance is our way of acknowledging their dependence on him and their gratitude for everything he does for them.

Most of the rituals the people of God practice are prescribed for them in Holy Scripture. This is the case in the ritual Jesus' family practices today. Let me place this ritual in its proper context. For this, we need to go to the books of Leviticus and Exodus.

I know what many of you are thinking, “Awesome, another sermon from Leviticus!” Sadly, our trip to Leviticus will be short.

Luke begins the passage from today stating, “When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.” In Leviticus 12:1-5, we know exactly what this purification ritual entailed. The passage reads the following way:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean for seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean for two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days.

Mary gave birth to Jesus 40 days ago and now the family is in Jerusalem to offer the ritual sacrifices necessary for her to be deemed cleansed from the flow of blood of childbirth. But, then Luke mentions the following, “As it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord.’” So, we see two things happening here: first, this is the sacrificial ritual of purification after childbirth. Second, this is the presentation and offering of the first born male to the service of God as it is mandated in Exodus 13:2 and other places. This passage reads as follows,

“The Lord said to Moses: Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.”

The consecration or offering of the first male born was a tradition that began after the Exodus, when God punished Egypt with the death of the first-born males and passed-over the homes of the Israelites, sparing their first born children. From that moment on the first-born animals were sacrificed, the first fruits of the harvest were burned, and the first-born male was dedicated to God in thanksgiving. The family was to come to the temple and offer sacrifices and prayers of dedication, offering the child to God. The child would then go home with his parents, but was thought to be special because of his special connection to God at the presentation.

So, today, the young family is at the temple to do two things. The book of Leviticus is very clear as to how this ritual needed to go. This is what Leviticus 12:6-7 says about this ritual:

“When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb

in its first year for a burnt-offering, and a pigeon or a turtle-dove for a sin-offering. He shall offer it before the Lord, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female.”

Luke tells us that, “They offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Clearly, the young family was too poor to offer a lamb, so they resorted to offering the young pigeons, which were much cheaper. Luke then tells about two characters who are able to “see” and recognize who the young child would grow to be and what he would do for his people. Both break out in praise to God. We are given old Simeon’s words, but we are not told what Anna says. What is important here is that we have evidence that there were both men and women in Israel who were willing to open their eyes and acknowledge Jesus for who he was, the Savior of Israel. Simeon says, “My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” This is an outstanding prayer. Old Simeon “saw” that this boy would be equally important to Jews and Gentiles. This boy was given for the salvation of the whole world. He would break the walls of separation between Jew and Gentile. He would call all peoples to himself. He would be the Savior of the whole world.

If anyone asked Simeon “Who are you going to the Temple to see today?” I don’t know if he would have been able to say, “The Savior I have been waiting for my whole life. The only hope of Israel. God in the flesh!” And yet, this is who he found, because he was willing to open his eyes. Now, let me ask you, “Who are you here to see? Why are you here today?” I hope you are here to see the Savior of the World. Without him there is no one else to see here! But, let me warn you that opening our eyes to see this Savior will have ethical consequences for us. Once you open your eyes to Christ, your entire life will change. For starters, the Christ you will find in this Church will expect you to look for him outside the walls of this Church. He will expect you to recognize him in the face of your brothers and sisters. He will expect you to treat others as though you are interacting with him every time you interact with others. He will expect you to forgive as you are forgiven and to love as you are loved.

I pray today that both you and I will be willing to open our eyes and see the Savior of the world as Simeon did. As we come to this place week after week looking for Christ, so we must go out into the world looking to love and serve Christ in all persons. May God’s Holy Spirit help us to recognize and be faithful to Christ.

Amen!