

Candlemas 2024
Rev. Dr. Les Martin
Luke 2:22–40

In the name of the living God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was known as the Second Temple that they came to that day. The first Temple built by Solomon in the year 1000, had been destroyed by the Babylonians in the year 586. And they did what they could. But it was smaller. And there were items missing most notably the Ark of the Covenant. In fact, it was so much smaller, so much less grand that it is said that many wept when they beheld the temple and how diminished it was. But the temple was still the center of Jewish life. Here the daily sacrifices were made: sacrifices of peace, of Thanksgiving, of atonement, and many, many more. Here all of Israel was called to come three times a year at Passover, at Shavuot, first fruits Festival, and the festival of Tabernacles.

It was here the rabbis said that underneath it all you could find the foundation stone of creation. And it was said that this mountain was the place where Abraham had demonstrated his faith and obedience in the near sacrifice of Isaac. Joseph and Mary come to the temple. Some patristic commentators suggest that it was their last stop on the return from the Flight into Egypt when they had fled the murderous wrath of Herod. Prior to this, we hear of them living in Bethlehem. Going forward, he is a Nazarene. But whether or not that's just legend, what we do know is why they came. They came for two reasons the reasons that give the feast its name. And the expectation of these reasons both come from Leviticus 12.

As we heard in our reading, a firstborn son must be presented to the Lord. Because the firstborn belong to him, an animal will be given in their place you buy them back as it were. And so they come to the temple to present their first born. Again in Leviticus 12, we read the expectation that a woman after childbirth must be purified, she is ritually unclean. And so Mary comes to the temple to be purified from childbirth. All of this an expectation of the law of the Lord. So what we can say if this couple is that they are faithful, whatever else we can say they are faithful, they are raising the son according to the tradition, just as they did with his circumcision on the eighth day. That's a feast on January 1, that is still celebrated, although somewhat overshadowed in our secular calendar.

They are also apparently struggling. Because the law in Leviticus is clear. For a firstborn, you're supposed to give a sheep. And then as a concession as a grace, it says if a sheep cannot be afforded, you may give a pair of birds. We don't know the exact circumstances of their struggle. But this faithful couple whether due to the flight or to poverty, we just don't know. They're giving the lesser sacrifice for their son. Keeping the law in spite of circumstances that suggest perhaps it wasn't all that easy for them. In Joseph and Mary, we see faithful hope in times of struggle and uncertainty.

Simeon and Anna, come to the temple. Anna is ancient, widowed and presumably childless, for she has made the temple her home prayer and fasting her work. Despite the losses of her life, Scripture tells us that she believes redemption will one day come. And then there is Simeon. He too has been looking for the restoration of Israel, the vision of the Messiah is promised to Him, He will not die until he sees the longed-for Messiah, the long-awaited hope. But the question is worth asking. When we're told that someone will not die, just how long has he been waiting? The venerable Bede suggest that in Simeon and Anna, we see all Israel waiting. Abraham, waiting, Adam and Eve male and female waiting, all creation, groaning and waiting.

Whatever Simeon's age, how long his personal journey has been, how long he's gone up those stairs to the temple on old and failing knees, year after year after year. Whatever his own journey, the weight has been very, very long. In Simeon and Anna, we see patient hope, in a world of suffering, their patient hope, the patient hope of all Israel, the patient hope of all creation. Jesus comes to the Temple today. The Talmud suggests that with the absence of the ark, the Lord's presence didn't really reside in the second Temple. That tragedy of tragedy joke of jokes when you pulled back the curtain and went into the Holy of Holies, you no longer saw the Shekinah glory of God. Instead, you saw emptiness as sad reminder of what once was, but would never be again.

Jesus comes to the temple to in our reading today, Malachi 3:1, "The word is this the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to His temple" suddenly doesn't mean right when we want it. It means no, no, no, no, no, no, yes. Jesus suddenly appears born in the arms of the Ark of the Covenant, his mother, he comes to the Temple. He comes to the Temple as the fulfiller of the law. He will one day say do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill them in his circumcision, his presentation in his life of Torah obedience and prophetic fulfillment. He does just that. It's not so much that law and prophets are discarded as they're finished. And they're finished for us. Let me remind you what Paul says Galatians 4. "For when the appropriate time had come. God sent out his Son, born of a woman born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we may be adopted as sons with full inheritance rights. And because you are sons God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts who calls Abba Father, so you are no longer a slave, but a son. And if you are a son, then you're an also an heir of God."

Jesus fulfills the law. Jesus comes to the Temple to purify and to restore the sacrificial priesthood. In Malachi today, we also read the promises of a Lord who like a refiner's fire or like laundry detergent will refine and cleanse the Levites. Who, who are the sacrificial priests? You see in Christ, the Levitical priesthood yields to the order of Melchizedek, the original priest of Jerusalem. You remember Melchizedek, don't you?

If you've ever had to read that Old Testament lesson where he comes up you remember trying to pronounce it Melchizedek means the King of Righteousness. He's way back in Genesis 14 after a battle

he shows up the original priest of Jerusalem, and He blesses Abraham with bread and wine. Hebrews 7, tells us that he is a priest without beginning or end without ancestry or lineage. He is simply a priest forever. Sounds familiar? From the Valley of Chavez, where he met Abraham, to the Temple of Jerusalem to our little humble altar. Today. Christ comes as priest and sacrifice offering us the bread and wine that contained the Final Sacrifice ever made. His Body and Blood.

It's ironic, isn't it? Mary walks into the Temple seeking purification. When the purification is right in our hands, for her and for us. Jesus comes, containing in himself the fulfillment of the promise of Abraham. Do you remember the promise to Abraham, our Father in Genesis 12:2-3, he's told he will be a great nation. and in Him all the nations will be blessed later in Genesis 22:17. He's told that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sand. Mathematically, if you add them up, they're not. And yet, as Simeon sees the promise of Abraham is fulfilled in a Gospel way in this infant, because as we know, through his blood, through baptism, and by faith, we are Abraham's descendants. We, his promised family and it spreads and it grows. And one day it will outnumber sand. Christ comes to the temple as the judgment that saves.

Simeon after rejoicing is a bit of a buzzkill in the story in verse 34, he turns to Mary and says "Listen," and he's been dancing and singing and saying all this good stuff and he says "this child will be the cause of the rising and falling of many," we can hear the music in the background and the soundtrack can't Yeah. He's it will be a sign that will be rejected. A revealer of secret thoughts. And then specifically to Mary and "the sword will pierce your own soul also." What is the sword? Grief, perhaps? Perhaps not. Let's go to Hebrews 4:12-13. It is written, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account." ¹ The sword that will pierce Mary's heart is the sword that must pierce all our hearts. For Jesus is the revealer of our secret thoughts. As St. Ambrose says, "God's word exposes the thoughts and intents of the heart, because all things are open and naked before the eyes of Mary's son, to whom the secrets of our conscience are made visible."

We come to the Temple at Candlemas is an old Christian feast and the blessing of candles today in ancient practice. It is first documented in the church of Jerusalem in 300 AD. It's one of the few feasts that is observed on the same day in much the same way by Christian, east and west. The use of candles at this time of the year may even have some earlier Roman roots. But why? Why do we come to the Temple in this way, in this day, because it's symbolic and liturgical import is so darn practical. We live in an uncertain world that is full of struggle. And whatever faith we managed to possess, if we're honest

¹ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Heb 4:12-13.

at times, we're willing to be honest, at times it doesn't seem enough. Or even real. Yet we come with whatever faith and hope we can manage.

We get up far too early on Sunday morning in a world that is forgotten, we take our showers, we rush out the door we try not to fight in the car. And we come here and here we meet Jesus. Oh, not gentle, Jesus meek and mild, at least not first. If we're paying attention here his truth will cut us like a knife. There's a temptation in the Christian world today to say all of those bad people out there all the politics Oh, the war, oh, the economy. And if we're paying attention we get in here. And the realization that God gives us is the darkness isn't just without the darkness is within. And he slices and dices. With the judgment that saves. And if we'll stick with it if we won't run or stumble like so many will.

We can realize as well that he has been faithful where we have not. We are free from condemnation. Because Melchizedek the new Adam is the sacrifice for our sin. In bread and wine. We receive the light of the world in there where our conflict lies just as surely as we receive the candles today. And just like the candles, that light will leave this temple with us. That's why you take them home to remember when it's dark when you're scared when the budget won't end. add up when the tragedy is real again light that candle. Because the light that candle represents goes with you. And the promise of Abraham is fulfilled as others see that light in our houses, and in our hearts and joy in the company of hope, and faith. That's the way our liturgy works, isn't it? It's the way our life works, isn't it? That's why we're here. Joseph and Mary and Simeon and Anna, today, we have come this day, we have come and our eyes is seen. And we can depart in peace