

Why were they there?  
Candlemas  
Luke 2:22-40

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My sermon preparation began with a deceptively simple question: *Why* exactly did Mary and Joseph go to the Temple with Jesus?

Luke tells us that, “when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, [Mary and Joseph] brought [Jesus] up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.’”

That’s straightforward enough, isn’t it? Mary came to be purified and Jesus was presented. Hence, in the Canadian *Book of Common Prayer*, this feast is officially called, “The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary.” It’s sort of a double-header: a feast of Our Lord, and a feast of Our Lady. And it’s rooted in the Old Testament Law, so what Luke is depicting is a typical pious and observant Jewish family doing what the Law requires. But is that all there is to it? One could say that the important action of this story is really depicted in what happens next with Simeon and Anna, really these opening verses simply set the scene. But if that is the case, should not the feast be called something like “The Revelation of the Lord’s Anointed to Simeon and Anna”? After all, that’s what most preachers, myself included, generally focus on when preaching on Candlemas.

But this evening, I’d like to suggest that the presentation of our Lord by Mary and Joseph really is the central action of this story, without which Simeon’s canticle and Anna’s prophesying makes no sense. I will pass over the ritual of purification following childbirth; perhaps its significance will become apparent to me next year or the year after that. But it occurred to me this past week that we would do well to ask ourselves why the Holy Family was in the Temple, and what it means to “present” Jesus as “holy to the Lord.”

The Old Testament background to the event we know as the Presentation in the Temple was provided yesterday at Evening Prayer. The first lesson was taken from the thirteenth chapter of Exodus: “When the Lord has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you, you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your livestock that are males shall be the Lord’s....Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. When in the future your child asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall answer, ‘By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.’”

Here, a specific form of redemption is reenacted. God redeemed the people of Israel by delivering them from slavery in Egypt, and God accomplished this through the final plague that befell Egypt at the Passover. In memory of this Passover redemption, the firstborn sons of Israel are redeemed by presenting a sacrifice to God. It is an act of thanksgiving for God's redemptive salvation of the Chosen People.

And so we can say that in essence, Mary and Joseph came to the Temple to redeem Jesus. But in a narrative twist so characteristic of the Gospel, what we are shown is that in fact, Jesus came to redeem *us*. Luke points toward this reality when he describes Anna, who "spoke of [Jesus] to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

Commentators often interpret this phrase, "redemption of Jerusalem," to indicate Messianic hope in a political liberation from the oppressive Romans akin to God's liberation of the people of Israel from the oppressive Egyptians. And this is certainly one layer. But I think that when the overall narrative sweep of Luke's entire Gospel is taken into account, the redemption of Jesus in his presentation in the temple is a foreshadowing of redemption writ large.

By "redemption writ large," I mean that Jesus is presented as the one who will redeem not only Jerusalem, but the world.

I could spend quite a bit of time on the meaning of "redemption" in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. And I am sure you would find it fascinating. But because this is a homily and not a sermon or an academic essay, I'm going to focus on one aspect of redemption, which I believe is the most meaningful one for the way we understand the meaning of life.

I had two conversations over the course of today where I found myself expanding on the meaning of redemption. In those conversations, as in many others, I tell people that the core of my personal faith in Jesus comes from the notion that God's *modus operandi* is to redeem. God demonstrates the victory of the divine life over the powers and principalities by taking the worst that Evil can do and bringing new life out of it, and in spite of it. We see God's confrontation of evil and injustice most powerfully in the self-emptying of Christ on the cross. God used the Crucifixion, an objective *evil*, to bring about the greatest *Good* known to humanity. Through the Cross, God effected our salvation and inaugurated the reconciliation of all people to God, insofar as we choose to *cooperate* with that saving grace, mediated to us through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Another way to put it is that redemption is God's job description. Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple to redeem him, but it is not they who redeem him, it is God. And through Jesus, the world is redeemed by God.

This means that everything that happens to us, whether good or evil, is an opportunity for redemption. Whoever we are and whatever we've done, if we offer ourselves to God, God's response is always, "I can work with this." God works with us, and in us, and through us to transform our lives so that we participate in the redemption and reconciliation of the world.

That's the good news. The bad news is that this does not mean we will not suffer. What it does mean, however, is that God is always at work to redeem our suffering if we offer it to God, to bring new life out of it.