

## Presentation of our Lord

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

---

Tonight, we celebrate one of the most ancient and important holy days of the church year: it's among the top 10 feast days listed in the *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>1</sup> I'm speaking, of course, of Groundhog's Day.

I'm only kidding a little. Today's feast has many names: the Presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple, the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and probably the most appropriate of the formal names – from the eastern Orthodox tradition – the Meeting. Today, we celebrate the revelation that Jesus is the “light to enlighten the nations” and, so, the feast became known as Candlemas – a day for blessing candles and oil lamps that would be used in the church and in homes throughout the year. People also began to look to the sky for signs of spring. There's an old poem:

If Candlemas be fair and bright,  
Winter has another flight.

---

<sup>1</sup> Seven Principal Feasts are listed in the BCP: Easter, All Saints', Ascension, Christmas, Pentecost, Epiphany, and Trinity Sunday. To these, three additional feasts are added: the Holy Name, the Presentation, and the Transfiguration. Only these 10 feasts take precedence over our usual celebration each Sunday of the Resurrection of our Lord. See pp. 15-16 of the BCP.

If Candlemas brings clouds and rain,  
Winter will not come again.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually, German Americans who immigrated to the US and missed the Candlemas tradition named February 2 Groundhog's Day.

Useless trivia aside, we do celebrate the feast of the Presentation today, thanks to Luke's care to include in his Gospel details of the Holy Family's adherence to Torah.<sup>3</sup> Two passages from Jewish law are at play in our text today. The first is Exodus 13. There, God instructs the Israelites that, because the firstborn males of Egypt died in the final plague against Egypt, all firstborn males among them – animals and people – belong to God. The firstborn male of any animal must be sacrificed, and the firstborn male child of every family must be redeemed through the sacrifice of an animal in his place (Ex 13: 1, 12-16). The customary sacrifice was a lamb and a turtledove, but those who could not afford a lamb redeemed their boys with two birds.

The second requirement of the law is found in Leviticus 12 where the law prescribes:

---

<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.catholic.org/news/hf/faith/story.php?id=73335>.

<sup>3</sup> It is as though Luke agrees with the author of Hebrews who says, in order for Jesus to carry out his work of salvation, "he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect" (2:17).

If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean for seven days ... 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 (12:2-4).

Now this law and its view of women is antiquated today. What I want us to focus on, however, is Luke's care in recording how the Holy Family complied with these passages from the law that were very much a part of their Jewish traditions at the time. In the verse before our reading today, Luke recounts Jesus' circumcision and naming ceremony which took place eight days after he was born, satisfying the first portion of the Levitical requirements (Lk 2:21). February 2<sup>nd</sup> is exactly 40 days after Jesus' birth (circumcise at 7 days, plus 33 more days until purification). So this feast always falls on February 2.

So, for the 40<sup>th</sup> day, Mary travels to the Temple for purification (as required by Leviticus) and to make the established offering of two birds (as required by Exodus). Amy Jill Levine, a Jewish scholar of the New Testament, reminds us that Jewish law did not require a child to be

presented in the Temple.<sup>4</sup> This is why I'm not a fan of calling today the "Presentation of our Lord." Of course, what else would a poor family who must travel to Jerusalem and the Temple do with their child? And so, Jesus is along for the ride.

Now there was, Luke tells us, "a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; [he] was righteous and devout, looking forward to the [redemption] of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon" made his way to the Temple the same day the Holy Family came. Simeon recognized Jesus at once and took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
for 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.

Mary has already heard the angel Gabriel say of her son: "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and ... God will give him the

---

<sup>4</sup> Amy Jill Levine, *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, study note to Luke 2:21-24, page 102.

throne of ... David.” Gabriel’s told her Jesus “will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there’ll be no end” (Lk 1:32-33). She’s listened as the shepherds recount how an angel appeared to them, saying: “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah” (Lk 2:11). Simeon’s words expand her understanding of this child: he is “a light to enlighten the nations.” He is the Savior of the whole world.

Mary doesn’t have to take Simeon’s word for it, though. There’s another in the Temple that day: the prophet, Anna. Anna recognizes Jesus as Messiah and becomes the first evangelist, praising God and speaking “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.” You can see why we count this day among the most holy of the whole church year: it’s the day Jesus is revealed as our Savior (not just the Savior of the Jews).

Before we get too caught up in the celebration, let’s pause a moment.

For Simeon isn’t yet done speaking to Mary. He continues:

This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

On this day in which we remember with joy Simeon and Anna, who recognized Jesus as the Savior of Jews and Gentiles alike, our joy is

tempered by the somber news that this salvation comes at a soul-piercing cost. This child is destined for glory **and** for suffering. Jesus will, one day, return to Jerusalem and when he does, “the temple priests who bless [him] today will . . . crucify him.”<sup>5</sup>

So it is that our joy this day is tinged with sorrow. Because right here, even from the beginning of Jesus life, we come face-to-face with the truth that the grace we receive through Jesus’ salvation isn’t cheap grace. Easter will come, but not before Good Friday. And though this may not seem like good news, it truly is. Jesus redeems every aspect of our lives: our joy, sorrow, success, failure, all of it. As the author of Hebrews puts it:

[Jesus] had to become like [us,] his brothers and sisters, in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested (2:17-18).

Thanks be to God!

---

<sup>5</sup> The Rev. Phil Hooper, “The Presentation: Joy and Sorrow,” 2020.