

First Sunday after Christmas—December 31, 2023

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’”

This Gospel reading today concerns the purification of Mary and Presentation of our Lord which is another day in the Church Year celebrated on February 2. This occurred, by command in Leviticus 12, to be done 40 days after birth. Much could be said about that and is on that day in the church year.

Today, though, on this first Sunday after Christmas, you hear this account along with what follows it through verse 40. There’s something the Lord would have you see in all this as you continue to celebrate his birth this Christmas season. It’s just that, you see. You are seeing your Lord and what this means now and for eternity. You join in confessing him with Simeon, Anna, and the whole church.

Notice something about Simeon when he beheld the Lord. He said, “my eyes have seen your salvation.” Simeon’s eyes were opened as he held Jesus in his arms. What he was seeing was the fulfillment of what God promised to him. God inspired St. Luke to write, “And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.” Luke recorded that for you and the same Holy Spirit gives you the eyes to see what Simeon saw.

What do you see? There’s a warning and comfort as you behold this word of God. The warning you have in all this is to fail or refuse to see who the Christ is and who you are in him. It may sound overly simplified, but the warning is real, and you are called to see the danger. Closing your eyes to Christ, his word, and his church will lead to darkness and death. The devil, the world, and your own fallen flesh are opposed to everything God speaks and opens your eyes to see.

God shows you this in the reading. Mary is told something about her son as he was to be in this world which shouldn’t surprise her but is still striking, nonetheless. “And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, ‘Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.’”

God, through Simeon, tells Mary that Jesus is going to be a stumbling block to people. There will be many who rise and fall an account of him. This will happen among their own people, and it will be her Son, Jesus, who is the point of division. Not because he is the cause of sin but because he is seen and beheld by sinners. Not only that but she is also told a sword will pierce her own soul. Many commentators have tried to explain what this means but understanding who Mary is as a sinner and who her Son is, you can see that this sword is the preaching and ministry of Jesus which will pierce through all of Israel and through her own soul as well. So, here’s Mary who is told all of this about her Son, God in the flesh.

When Mary sees her Son, she is looking at her God and Lord. Everything God had promised finds its fulfillment in the very child conceived and born in her womb. Her God and Lord is her Son. This doesn’t mean, though, Mary and Joseph would go around bragging about how their Son could walk on water and raise the dead. No what this means is that as she would see him grow up in stature and wisdom, he would be the person men would seek to kill and ultimately, she would stand at the foot of the cross and she her own Son hanging there naked suffering excruciating pain as he died the death of a criminal. This is the future Mary was told would be for her Son, the one she held in her arms as a newborn in Bethlehem and wrapped in swaddling clothes.

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The text explains, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” Jesus and his earthly life saw the fall and rise of many and it does today. Hearts are revealed when it comes to Jesus as there is no middle ground. One is either for or against him and the lukewarm he will vomit out of his mouth.

For God to pierce souls is for him to see and go deep into the depths of your heart too. Later in Luke Jesus said, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.” Gathering on this day God breaks you because, in your sin, you need to be broken. Lest you kid yourself, sin is slavery, and it wraps its talons around you like a bird of prey only to let you drop into the pits of hell. There’s no escape and no freedom when you are a slave. The only way out is if you are set free and bought back. You must be ransomed to have true freedom and life. The Epistle reading from Galatians speaks to that when God says, “I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world.”

The devil, the world, and your fallen flesh blind yourselves to these things that God is talking about in his word before you today. That’s why God pierces through and reveals it. Like those who haven’t heard the gospel there’s a danger for you even as Christians to go back into that slavery of the elementary principles of the world which is to say there’s a distinction between the ways and workings of the fallen world as opposed to being a new creation in Christ and the freedom that comes with it. As Christians you are different than world around you and the ways it thinks and acts. As Christians you can get caught up in this in many ways. The principles of the world start guiding you when we close your ears to God’s word and God’s word isn’t a daily voice in your life. Your eyes begin to close and you don’t see the truth which God has opened to your eyes to see through his word.

See the danger and warning of God. Look at how common things have become accepted in our culture that are clearly against God’s word but seem shocking to people when you talk about them. Take something like talking about marriage and what God teaches about his institution you get a look on faces that you might as well be telling people they are from Mars and wear shoes on their eyeballs. Or look at how people have come to view church attendance or even what the church is to be? You can become slave to the world to the point that we think the church and God must bow the knee to the world and not the other way around all at the threat of survival in terms of worldly standards rather than the clear and certain promises of Christ himself. So, what’s happened? When you become slaves to the elements of this world you start thinking God is wrong or the Bible isn’t true, and the real truth are the lies. C.S. Lewis once famously said, “When the whole world is running towards a cliff, he who is running in the opposite direction appears to have lost his mind.”

But what does God say about this present age? What will happen? Well in the Gospel lesson today you see that Jesus is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel. The Word became flesh and dwelled among his people and not everybody was or is happy about that. Know who you are, though. “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it” Jesus also said in Luke’s Gospel. Know your old man that wants nothing more than to turn from the Lord and seek after its own wants and desires. Crucify that old man and his pride and don’t be scandalized by Jesus. Those who won’t fall before Jesus in worship and faith, the Lord will fall upon them in judgement, and all will be revealed on the Last Day. Hold fast to his word; hear it and keep it. Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Dear Christians, Mary was told all of this, and she serves as an example for the church of God, for you, what it means to hold to these words. Back when Gabriel appeared to her, she responded to all this that would take place which in terms of the worldly thinking didn’t make one iota of sense, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Here in the temple, she hears this word, and she is blessed by God at who her Son has been appointed to be. To live as one who goes through this world as a servant of the Lord is to have that same confession as Mary, the mother of God, “Let it be to me according to your word.” It’s to see with her and with Simeon the salvation God has prepared for you.

God's word to you this day of Christmas is "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." Mary's Son is the Savior of the world and through him you have become a son of God. Your sin is forgiven, and you have been set free from your slavery to sin, death, and the power of the devil. You have real freedom as you go through this world as an heir of God. You see in the darkness for you have the Light of the world. In the Epistle reading God shows you who you are in Christ. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God."

What a glorious thing God does for you in Christ. The hymn of the day beautifully proclaims this when you sang a few minutes ago, "He undertakes a great exchange, puts on our human frame, and in return gives us His realm, His glory, and His name, His glory, and His name." That doesn't make sense that Christ would do this, but he has because of his love and mercy toward you. You were slaves held captive and walked in darkness, but Christ has redeemed you and gives you light and life and calls you as his own.

You see who you are, and you see the world around you as a child of God. Your eyes have been opened and you see the salvation promised to God's people and promised to you. God is your Father as you have been baptized into Christ and been clothed with him. Your soul has been pierced and your old man falls every day, and the new man rises. You have been raised to new life in Christ and you go through this world as one who belongs to him and doesn't walk in darkness but has the light of life and has a future glory to come. That's the confidence God gives you today that sees Jesus and clings to him. You have all that he has won for you by his righteous life, atoning death, and resurrection from the dead. Your conscience is clear as you live because you know where you stand with God. The burden has been lifted and you have freedom to live, really live in what the Lord has given to you.

Mary went through this world knowing this and that her Son was the one who would save her even to the point of seeing him die on the cross. The people of God, the new Israel, the Church goes through this life knowing what Mary knew and as the Church she submits to her head, Christ, and suffers all rather than fall away from him. In all things though she knows, you know, the Lord is the one who has come and redeemed you by his blood. He is the one who has forgiven you and set you free. He is the one who gives life eternal even as you face death in this world. That's great reason to rejoice this day of Christmas and lift up your eyes even in suffering and bearing the crosses appointed for you. God has sent his Son and now you belong to God.

"And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." Mary and Joseph departed that place and returned home as ones who had heard God's word and were blessed in hearing it. The favor of God was upon them and is upon Jesus and God's favor is upon you. The Lord is here now this day and will send you on your way in this same favor and blessing as he refreshes you with his word and sacraments. With Simeon you hold fast to Christ not in your arms like him but in your ears and on your baptized foreheads and upon your tongue and mouth as the same Jesus is here right now for you. Mary's child is her Lord and God just as he is yours. His future is your future and what a glorious one it is. God is your Father, and he delights in you his child and what your future holds. Go through this life as an heir of all things. Taste and see that the Lord is good, and his steadfast love endures forever. And then go and depart this place and, whenever the Lord wills it, in this earthly life in this peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding always knowing Christ is yours and you are his own.

Really, then, you are departing in peace. Take comfort in who Christ is and what he has done. Depart in peace, that is depart in the forgiveness of Christ and know you will see your Lord face to face one day. This is who you are as an heir who calls God your Father. You are sons of God who see and know God now through his means and will see the Lord face to face with your own two eyes. "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;

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for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.