

Firstborn

Luke 2:22-40

December 26, 2021

The Word of the Lord from Luke 2:22-24: “And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male who first 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.’” This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

I. The Dedication of the Firstborn

Today’s text really begins in Egypt, in the hectic aftermath of the first Passover. The Israelites have been slaves in Egypt for 400 years, but God has not forgotten His people. He’s sent Moses as his spokesman, warning Pharaoh again and again, “Let My people go.” Pharaoh’s stubbornly refused, so the Lord has afflicted Egypt with nine plagues to persuade him that rebellion against God is a very foolish thing. For all people, the wages of sin is eventually death; and when Pharaoh refuses to submit to God, he learns this terrible lesson in the tenth plague: the Lord declares that He will come through the land and take the lives of the firstborn males of Egypt, both man and beast.

Every firstborn will die...unless. The Lord declares to His people that their firstborn sons can be saved. They are to take a lamb without blemish, and they’re to sacrifice it. They’re to put the blood of the lamb on the lintels and doorposts of their dwellings, and they’re supposed to roast the lamb and eat it for dinner. The people follow the Lord’s instructions about His Passover to the letter; and when the Lord comes through Egypt to take the lives of the firstborn males, He passes over every home marked with the blood of the lamb and spares those who dwell inside.

The tenth plague—the death of the firstborn—finally moves Pharaoh to submission, at least for the moment. He orders the people of Israel out of his land: after 400 years of slavery, they are free and on the move. One can only imagine the chaos as an entire people packs up to leave; and as they leave Egypt, the Lord commands them to remember the Passover every year. He also says, “Consecrate to Me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is Mine” (Exodus 13:2). The firstborn males of animals are to be sacrificed as an offering to God. The firstborn males of the people are to be redeemed by sacrifice, consecrated to God by the blood of a lamb—or a pair of turtledoves or pigeons for those who are very poor. The Lord is adamant: this is a law to be remembered. He goes on to say in Exodus 13:

“And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of My sons I redeem.’ It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:14-16). So the people are to remember that the Lord redeems the firstborn, and He redeems by sacrifice.

Centuries later, Mary and Joseph come to the temple in obedience to this command. Jesus, Mary's firstborn Son, is forty days old, and it is time to make the sacrifice to redeem Him before God. Mary and Joseph are poor: they bring a pair of turtledoves or pigeons, not the preferred lamb for sacrifice.

But then again, they do bring the Lamb; and this is the mystery that makes this text such a stunning one for meditation. The Lord has commanded His people to redeem their firstborn sons for two reasons: to remember how He delivered them from Egypt, and to proclaim to them how He will deliver them from sin, death and hell. He will deliver them by redeeming them, and He will redeem them with a sacrifice, with the shedding of blood. The shedding of His own blood. That's why Jesus is born of Mary: God becomes man so that He has blood to shed for your redemption.

So what is happening when the Lord comes suddenly to His temple that day, incarnate as a forty-day-old boy? The mystery of the Incarnation is in full flower here. A sacrifice is made for Jesus—and that sacrifice is made to Jesus. By this sacrifice, this firstborn Son is declared redeemed; and because of this sacrifice, it is the firstborn Son who is declaring the redemption. A sacrifice is made to redeem Him who needs no redemption. But He does it to keep the Law perfectly for you, to give you the credit for His obedience; and, later on, the One who needs no redemption will instead be the Sinner who is condemned by His Father on the cross for the sins of the world. The eternal Son of God and Lord of life is going to die.

So if you ask someone to point to the sacrifice in our text and they point to the pair of birds, they're right. And if they point to the Baby who isn't sacrificed that day, they're right too: they're even more right, because the sacrifice of the birds is to foreshadow the shedding of Jesus' own blood. Likewise, if you ask someone to point to God's location in our text and they point to the Holy of Holies in the temple that stands before Mary and Joseph, they're absolutely right. If they point to the Baby in Mary's arms, better yet! He is God become man and become manifest, to redeem us from our sin.

That's what happens at this dedication of the firstborn. Colossians 1 calls Jesus the firstborn of creation, for the eternal Son of God is now incarnate, born of Mary. Colossians 1 also calls Him the firstborn of the dead, because the One who once was the Sacrifice for sin is also now the risen Son of God. Crucified for the sins of the world, He lives again to give life forever.

That's where Simeon, Anna and you come in.

II. Simeon, Anna and You

Simeon is a righteous and devout man. We assume he's older because he's pondering death, but he's been told by the Holy Spirit that he will not see death until he sees the Christ. Today is the day: coming to the temple, he sees Mary, Joseph and the Baby. Remember: the temple's a busy place; and for all we know, there's a bunch of young couples with kids around. There's no halo around Jesus' head: He's just an ordinary-looking baby to the eye. That's why our text mentions the Holy Spirit so much in connection with Simeon, so that you might know that Simeon knows that Jesus is the Messiah because the Spirit has revealed this to him. He knows the Christ by faith, not by sight.

And by faith, he takes the Child in his arms and blesses God with a prayer you know so well: “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 the glory of Your people Israel.” This too is an astounding moment: as Simeon prays to the Lord about the Child, he is praying to the Child: if he were staring into the Baby’s eyes and calling Him “Lord,” he would not be wrong, for Simeon holds God in his hands.

Simeon reveals something else in this prayer: he says that this One brings salvation for all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles. This is the Savior of the world. Then he blesses them, and his words to Mary are sobering. He says, “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 the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” Although the Son of God deserves the devotion and worship of all, He will not receive it, says Simeon. He will be opposed to the point where Mary’s soul is pierced with grief. Many will rise and many will fall. This will not be about outward appearances: it won’t be that some will earn His favor by good works. It will be about faith and unbelief, about the thoughts from the heart. Simeon’s prophecy will prove true: the Pharisees—whom you would expect to follow the Messiah—will bitterly oppose Him and plot His death, while the suffering, the downtrodden and the repentant sinners will rejoice in His coming.

One of these is Anna, the daughter of Phanuel. We know very little about her, but her life is not the sort that people dream of. She is 84 years old. She was married once upon a time for seven years, but she has been widowed ever since; and if she was married at the typical age, then she’s been a widow for around sixty years. It is a long time to be alone in any era, but it is far worse at the time of the New Testament. To be a widow then is to live in poverty, without protection. To live so for sixty years is to know a lot of loneliness, want and suffering. So Anna’s life is one of fasting, prayer and waiting: she waits for the redemption of Jerusalem, waits for the Messiah. She has nothing in this world to trust in, so she trusts in God’s promise of a Deliverer. On this day, her prayers are answered. She sees the Redeemer, swaddled up and carried in the temple, and she gives thanks to God. In this Savior, she will be delivered from this life of suffering to eternal life in heaven.

Anna is one of the first Christians, then—one of the first followers of Jesus. She’s an example of what Simeon has just said. This Messiah does not gather the powerful and strong as a fighting force to win an upcoming battle; He gathers the weary and heavy laden. He gathers those who despair of themselves and do not trust in the things of this world, but trust in Him. He does not assemble them to fight His battle: He’s going to do the fighting for them throughout His life and by His death. This infant Savior has already shed blood to save His people, and will die for their sins and rise again to win the victory over sin, death and devil.

That’s Simeon and Anna. Then there’s you. Like Anna, yours is a life of waiting, too—waiting for the Christ to return in glory. You await deliverance. It may be the loneliness of widowhood. It may be the waiting for deliverance from pain or disease. It may be waiting for employment or better employment, for an improved situation in the family or in yourself. Whatever your situation, there will be reminders of the curse of sin, that there’s just something wrong, whether you can put your finger on it or not. If you don’t feel this restlessness, then take the Lord’s Word that it is so: all of creation groans for redemption, and you are not exempt from the curse of sin.

You're also like Simeon. By the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the Word of God, you know of Jesus. You know that the Son of God became flesh, lived and died for you. By faith, you also know where to find your Savior: as the Spirit pointed Simeon to the Infant Jesus in the temple, so He points you to your baptism, to the Word and to the Supper. These means of grace have no halo floating above them, but the Lord is there all the same. Guided by the Spirit, then, you go to where your Savior is found, present with forgiveness and life. You hear the Word. You receive Christ's body and blood. It's no wonder that, after the Supper, you sing Simeon's song—because the Savior is just as body-and-blood present with you as He was with Simeon when Simeon held Him in his arms.

We're back to some mystery again, more to ponder like the Incarnation. You wait for the Savior to return; and as you wait for the Savior, He waits with you in His means of grace, to strengthen and preserve you in the one true faith unto life everlasting.

As you wait, do you know what the Lord calls you? Firstborn.

Hebrews 12:23 calls the Church "the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven," and you are numbered among them. Like the firstborn sons of Israel in Egypt, you have been saved from death by a sacrifice of blood: the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Like the firstborn of Bible times, the inheritance of the Father is yours: the Lord declares that the kingdom of heaven is yours. This is so because Jesus, the firstborn of creation has joined you to Himself in Holy Baptism; there, you were adopted as sons of God.

It is not your doing. It is not your righteousness or works that make you an heir of the kingdom of heaven. You will still be pierced with suffering and grief as you wait for that inheritance to be revealed. But it is yours, because in the fullness of time, "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" (Gal 4:4-5). Redeemed by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead, **you** are among the assembly of the firstborn, for you are forgiven for all of your sins.

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