

EPIPHANY 4, A, The Purification of Mary – February 2, 2020  
SCRIPTURES – 1 Sam. 1:21-28; Heb. 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-32

*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 turtle-doves, or two young pigeons.” Luke 2*

Today’s Gospel relates one of those strange Jewish traditions that can make the Bible seem old and unconnected to us. **“When the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses”** – what’s this all about? What does Mary’s going to the temple 40 days after she gave birth to Jesus in obedience to a Jewish tradition regarding purity – a law, in fact, laid down by Moses – have to do with you and me?

Well, we need to know the background. God had told the Jews in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible, which Moses wrote) that blood was holy, for **“the life of every creature is its blood.”** (Lev. 17:14) A person who had been bleeding, then, was accountable for life being poured out. *“He had blood on his hands,”* is a good way to think of it. So, blood needed to be offered to God, acknowledging Him as the Giver and Sustainer of life, for a person with blood on his hands to be cleansed and received by God as holy. Since blood came forth when a woman gave birth, and perhaps for a while afterward, she had to go to the temple to offer a sacrifice for her purification. This is why Mary went to the temple 40 days after Jesus’ birth.

Now: did you notice how Luke phrased this event; the seeming mistake he made? Luke wrote, **“When the time came for their purification...”** Their purification? Moses required only that the mother be purified, not her baby. Why didn’t Luke write, *“her purification”*? Prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is the ultimate author of the Scriptures, Luke included Jesus in this act. He was telling us that from the very beginning of His life, Jesus – who from the womb was proclaimed to be the Lord, the Giver of the Law who was above the Law – was put under God’s Law and required to keep it. He did this for us, who are ourselves responsible for living our lives in accordance with God’s good Law. The book of Hebrews (2:14, 17) puts it this way: **“Since the children share in flesh and blood, [Jesus] himself likewise partook of the same... He had to be made like [us] in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.”** Jesus was not only under the Law as us. He was for us. He served as our High Priest.

- The High Priest in the temple would throw the blood of a person’s sacrifice on the altar to offer it to God for his cleansing. Jesus offered to God on our behalf Himself: His own life of obedience to God’s Law, and then His bloody death as the payment (propitiation) for our sins, our breaking of it.

- And, as the High Priest would then turn and sprinkle the blood of a person's sacrifice on him to declare God's forgiveness of him and acceptance of him, so Jesus gives Himself to us to bring us God's forgiveness and acceptance.

This is why Luke tells us of the old man Simeon, who took Jesus in his arms when he saw Him in the temple. Simeon is one of us – a believer in God who is waiting for the coming of the Christ – and so he speaks for us. **“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word.”** As you take Jesus in your arms – as you rejoice in your baptism, in which you received Him and were joined to Him; as you hear and believe His Word, and receive Him in the sacrament of His body and blood – peace with God is yours, for Jesus is your peace! Jesus is **“[God's] salvation that [He has] prepared in the presence of all peoples... a light for revelation to the Gentiles...”** which is you! So: you who believe in Him can truly say that you are innocent of sin and have no guilt, for Jesus paid for your sin and canceled its debt! You can also say that you truly keep God's Law and haven't failed God in the least, for Jesus kept it perfectly for you, and God, who knows your faith, counts His obedience as yours!

But, let this be more than just believed. Let your faith and obedience to God be seen! St. Paul wrote to Titus (2:14), **“[Jesus] gave Himself to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works.”** Be zealous like Mary! You know, one might wonder: did she have to go to the temple to purify herself? She had given birth to the Holy One of God, after all, the holy and eternal Son of the Father! Did she need to offer the sacrifice Moses required?

Some say that Mary was not obligated to keep this Law of Moses because she shed no blood during Jesus birth. He miraculously passed through her womb so that she gave birth without pain or blood. Even Martin Luther believed this for a time. So, she was not under this law! Now, I don't buy this. Jesus was just like us in every way, the Bible says, including birth. But, Mary could say, and we can truly say, that in Him we are not under the law and obligated to it. We can say this because God says this. His Word, Gal. 3:24-26, says: **“the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.”** And Rom. 10:4 says, **“Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”** The Law has ended for you, because Jesus kept God's Law completely, and His complete obedience is yours by faith. There truly is nothing you have to do!

Don't let this make you think, however, that you can do whatever you want. Don't seek ways to get around God's Law – which is what we are inclined to do. You know how we are. We constantly offer excuses and seek ways to dodge laws and get around them. *“I didn't know!... Everyone else was doing it...”* Our skill at dodging is why warning labels are so precise and contracts so lengthy. We'll find a way around it! Reflecting on this in his sermon on Mary's purification, Martin Luther said:

“Our disobedience and miserable bad habits do not comport well with the example of the child Jesus who is Lord over the Law. In comparison, Moses is a mere man and beggar. He, nevertheless, did what Moses required of other children who are sinners. The Virgin Mary did likewise... These two examples shame us and highlight our sinfulness... we might blush red with shame when we realize we do not do the things required of us by the Lord from whom we have everything. He did it all for our sake when He complied with the Law of Moses, His servant, even though by rights He was not obligated. Really, we ought to spray ourselves full of red paint and say, I am not worthy that the sun shines on me since my Lord and Savior has subjected Himself under the Law... Should I not be obedient to my Lord and follow His example who for my sake became man, permitted Himself to lie in a cradle, be carried to Jerusalem, and be obedient to His servant Moses to whom He owed no obedience?” (The House Postils, I, 296)

But, instead of covering you with red paint, your Lord sprinkles His holy blood – His blood which purchased God’s forgiveness and blessing – upon you. How blessed you and I truly are!

Let us live to be blessings to others, and so bring honor and glory to our Lord. As Joseph and Mary carried Jesus in their arms and brought Him to the Lord’s temple, that He might fulfill God’s Law for us, so you are blessed to help others fulfill God’s will for their lives. And even if you think there is little you have to offer – like Joseph and Mary, who were so poor they could not offer a lamb but only a pair of birds... well, like them, you have Jesus! You carry Him in your mind and your heart. Your very body is His.

Rejoice, then, to live your life under the Lord’s direction and blessing, as did Mary, and Joseph, and Simeon, and all of the Lord’s people who have gone before you. Live in the peace of your Savior and His Word, and He will make you a blessing for others! To the glory of Jesus, our Savior and High Priest. Amen.