

The Presentation of our Lord

Why don't we begin today by opening up the Book of Common Prayer? You can find it in your pews, the red book, and turn to page 16. This is the section that explains the calendar for our life together as a Church. Page 16. You will see there under #2 on page 16, entitled "Sundays," that it says

All Sundays of the year are feasts of our Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to the dated days listed above, only the following feasts, appointed on fixed days, take precedence of a Sunday:

The Holy Name

The Presentation

The Transfiguration

Then if you flip over to page 20, you'll see that the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple is observed on February 2 of each year. When February 2 lands on a Sunday then we observe this celebration as a way of sharing in a special event in the life of Jesus Christ our Savior. (I know some of you think that I just make this stuff up but now you can see that I don't!)

Now, I'm willing to bet that you, like me, have not celebrated the Presentation of our Lord each and every year on February 2. I'm betting that it's not circled on your calendar each year. This isn't a part of our usual way of being church. But as I looked into it, I discovered a whole lot of history with some very interesting practices, and I discovered a dump truck load full of grace that we can receive this day because of God's incredible goodness.

So, here is what we know.

The Gospel of Luke tells this story that we just heard of Mary and Joseph bringing the baby Jesus to the Temple on the 40th day of his life. If Jesus was born on Christmas Day, February 2nd – today – is that 40th day. It's when Leviticus 12 required that the mother be ritually purified in the Temple and Exodus 13 required that a child be brought as an offering to God. The law says that a lamb should be offered though it allows for a family who cannot afford a lamb to offer two doves. This is one of the ways that we know that the Holy Family was poor and it serves as a reminder to poor and rich alike that God's love and favor is available to us all – that if God-incarnate was born into poverty then we might also find God, not in material comforts or in the wealth and fame so valued by our culture, but in a life of abundant simplicity and a life rich in relationships.

Now what about these candles? We began worship with blessing the candles that adorn this house of worship and processing them into place. That is because today is also known as Candlemas, which is a way of observing the Presentation of our Lord because of the emphasis on Jesus as the Light of the World in the Song of Simeon, the Nunc Dimittis, which you may know from daily Evening Prayer. In this song that we all recited together, the elderly Simeon rejoices alongside the Prophet Anna, and Simeon speaks of the deep longings of his heart over the decades to know the Messiah of God. Simeon reaches out his gnarled hands to hold this dear infant boy as his heart sings:

Lord, you now have set your servant free *
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, *
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A Light to enlighten the nations, *
and the glory of your people Israel.

We light these candles because they remind us of the one eternally begotten from the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God. So, we observe Candlemas as part of the Presentation of our Lord. You can look up to see all kinds of customs around this day in different countries such as people in Belgium, France, and parts of Switzerland eating crepes. (It is always a good idea to eat crepes! I'm pretty sure that's in the Bible somewhere!) Or if you are one who cannot take down your Christmas decorations on the 12th night or Epiphany then in some countries Candlemas, February 2, is when you would put them away.

Of course, we don't observe these rituals just to have some fun and or to be super pious religious people. Let's not feel liturgically smug this morning! We come as people longing for God's love and favor. We light these candles and bless them because they symbolize the light of Christ in our lives and in our world. We cradle them forward like Simeon who held the Light of Life in the Christ child. There is plenty of darkness to go around and sometimes our spiritual sight even gets confused about what is darkness and what is light, **but when we turn to Christ, we find something. We find someone entirely different.**

What I like about this feast is that it feels very solid in an old school kind of way. Sure, we have evidence of people observing it in the 3rd century but that's not what I mean. What I mean in saying this is very cool Old School stuff is that this passage in Luke shows an example of how Jesus **kept every part of the Law** and how he is ultimately the very fulfillment of the Law. Even as an infant, he was doing for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. He kept the law perfectly so he could be the perfect offering for your sins, and not just yours but the sins of the whole world.

Yet too often, we still live as if we are under the Law. For example, when push comes to shove, at some point we are each going to meet our Maker. We imagine that when we die there will be some kind of accounting for our lives. Were we good people or were we bad people? Did we help others or did we just help ourselves? And when we add up the sum of our lives, it's rather terrifying to think about the lies we have told, the injustices we have ignored, the ways we have made our neighbors into "others" that we owe nothing to or just want to get rid of, the luxuries that we take for granted while others are living in cardboard boxes, and all of the mistakes we have made. The wages of sin is death. When we add up our lives, they add up to death. We are no angels, are we?

But, as it says in Hebrews this morning, Jesus did not come to help angels. He came to help actual people like you and me. It says that in Christ we are not held in slavery by our fear of death. I don't think the math of our lives works until Jesus himself joins with us and all of his goodness and all of his love becomes our goodness and our love.

Because of Jesus, when God looks at you, God does not see your sins. God does not see the mistakes that you made in your marriage.... Or the shortcomings of your parenting. God does not see the hurtful things you have said to your siblings or what you have wished on people who have hurt you. God does not see the lies you told your parents or the times you have cheated at school or on your taxes or any time else. When God looks at you, God sees his beloved sons and daughters, embraced into the very Body of Christ. You are the crown jewel of God's creation redeemed by the blood of the lamb!

We are not held in slavery by the fear of our mistakes, even by the fear of death. We have one before us who has met every demand of the Law, who has fulfilled what we couldn't fulfill ourselves. Because of this, he is able to help us. Because of this, we have a great high priest interceding on our behalf. Because one day when you're presented in the Temple before the living God, you have nothing to fear. It will be a joyful day! Because of this, you can enjoy your forgiveness right now.