

FOCUS: The Good News is Jesus was presented in the temple under the Law, but came to fulfill the Law

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

Today, the church marks the presentation of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Temple. It's appropriate that we step back just a bit from the texts of this feast to understand what is going on, and why it is important enough that the Evangelists' recorded it and the church celebrates it as a feast day.

According to the Law of Moses, given to us in the thirteenth chapter of Exodus, the Lord commanded Moses to “consecrate to [the Lord] all the firstborn, whatever is the first open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.”¹ In verse 12, the Lord tells Moses this again, qualifying or clarifying it to say that it is the firstborn *male*—either human or animal—which is to be dedicated to the Lord. The Israelites did this, and continue to do this, because it is a reminder of the Lord, by the strength of the Lord's own hand, brought the Chosen People out of slavery in Egypt. This presentation was to be done when the firstborn was forty days old. Further, at the time of the presentation, the mother of the child, having been ritually unclean from the process of childbirth, was to also make an offering at the temple so that she might be made clean and return to her normal activities in the community.

Because this feast is a fixed feast—coming on the fortieth day after the Nativity—it falls outside the sequence of events offered in our lectionary. We have already marked the baptism of Jesus and the start of his public ministry, but today, we go back thirty-some years in his life to mark what is really the last feast of the Christmas season. It falls in the season of Epiphany because of the calendar, yes, but also because it is a festival that highlights Jesus as the Light of the world and his being revealed to the people who have been waiting for the promised Messiah.

With this as our background, let's explore these wonderful lessons and discover the Good News that awaits us this morning.

The prophet Malachi offers a short, but intense, prophecy for the Hebrew people. In an oracle of the Lord, Malachi, which means “my messenger,” and may not be his real name, offers his oracle of the Lord in a “Q&A” style, rather than like an oracle that we might find in the other parts of the Hebrew Scriptures. He emphasizes several things that ring familiar in our ears—sin, judgment, repentance, and the coming of the day of the Lord. These four issues are tied together in one central theme for Malachi—fidelity. This fidelity is to the covenant established

¹ Exodus 13:2 (NRSV)

by the Lord with His Chosen People and fidelity to the Lord's teachings. Malachi is trying to tell the people—and especially the Levites, the priestly class—to clean up their act and pay attention. “The Lord loves Israel,” Malachi tells the people. “But you people of Israel are forgetting to love the Lord!” In our pericope—a fancy word we use to call a little sliver of text from the Bible—Malachi is telling the people that God will send a messenger to come to them before the day of the Lord, and this will be the messenger for whom they have been waiting. However, when the messenger arrives, he won't be coming just to have a cup of coffee and some cookies with you, dear Israelites. No, he is coming to be like a “refiner's fire and like fuller's soap.” That is, he is coming to purify the people like a refiner would use fire to melt and purify silver or a fuller would use soap to whiten and brighten garments. These are not nice, “squishy,” or “feel good” images of the coming of the messenger of the Lord. The promised one is going to come and shake things up—wash out all the dirt and melt off the impurities. This is quite a message for the people, isn't it?

Then comes Simeon, a priest in the temple whose task it was to handle the presentations of the first-born boys and male animals. I can only imagine what an assembly-line like event this must have been, even as it was treated with the reverence and awe due to any sacrificial act in the temple. Imagine how many times Simeon would have performed the liturgy each day, each week, each year. And, Simeon was an old man, so he had been at it for years. He was probably an expert at smiling graciously and remarking what a fine boy/bull/ram/dog/cat etc the family was presenting. Gracious, but probably not excited.

Until one day, when this couple from Nazareth appears at the temple to present their first-born son to the Lord according to the Law of Moses and to offer the specified offerings to ritually cleanse the young mother. Simeon takes the infant into his arms as he would normally do, and suddenly realized that this child is different. Simeon realized that *this* child was *the* child whom the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon would be the much anticipated Messiah. He cries out in those words so familiar to us from our Eucharistic liturgy, “Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace! Your Word has been fulfilled! For *I* have seen the salvation you have promised before all peoples!” *This child was different!* And Simeon also knew that these young parents were completely clueless as to what it all meant, and to what the future held for their son and themselves.

Simeon had his *epiphany*, his coming to light. And no sooner had he blessed Mary and astounded the young couple, Anna, an elderly widow who spent her life in the temple, praying and fasting and caring for matters around the building, started telling everyone within earshot—and probably out of earshot, too—who this child was. Anna, too, has an epiphany. That for which she had waited her whole life just as Simeon had waited, was being fulfilled right before her. All praise be to God!

What should we, as twenty-first century Christians, make of all this? How does this single historical event in the life of Jesus make a difference for us, other than to provide the text for a brief canticle we sing in worship?

Jesus was brought to the temple because it was required of him under the Law handed to Moses from the Lord Most High. Jesus didn't *need* to be dedicated to the Lord, of course, but Jesus was because that was what was necessary of all humans and animals to fulfill the Law. But Jesus would not only fulfill *this* law, but Jesus would fill *the* Law.

All that was specified in the Law that men and women were required to do was specified so that the people might be in a right relationship with their God. It was the job of the chief priest, on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, to be the one to offer the sacrifice in the temple for all of the people. However, on the cross on Good Friday, Jesus, our Great High Priest, made the single greatest sacrifice for the atonement of all. On the cross, Jesus sacrificed *himself* so that all might be saved. Jesus fulfilled the Law so that we wouldn't have to worry if we had made all the right sacrifices, done all the proper things, eaten all the right foods, prayed all the right prayers.

The Rev. James Childs, a professor at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, offers these words in his concluding comments on this Gospel text. I don't think I can sum it all up any better as to why the Presentation of Our Lord is a great festival for us to celebrate.

“So we find ourselves, like Simeon and Anna, awaiting the redemption of a world in which corrosive forms of conflict can be found at virtually every level of human interaction. It seems we are unable to receive Jesus' word and way of peace. Anna and Simeon clung to the promises until the sign finally came. So do we. This is the walk of faith on the way to sight. Yet in the child presented in the temple who would one day be the Easter Christ, our eyes too have seen God's salvation.”² Thanks be to God.

² *New Proclamation*, Year B, 2002-2003 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 104.