

Sermon Draft

Text: Luke 2:22–40

Sermon: “40 Days”

For the Holy Church, today is not “Groundhog Day” or “Super Bowl Sunday.” February 2 is a key point in the Epiphany season. Our Lord is being revealed *as* Lord; his light is being uncovered for the world, or at least the faithful, to see. Our paraments are white because this is a special day.

Today’s Gospel has a Christmas flavor, as Jesus here is a baby being carried in loving arms. At Christmas, we expect big things. But today, on the secular calendar it’s just Groundhog Day for those who care about the weather or Super Bowl Sunday for football fans. That’s about it.

Yet today, a big thing happens: forty days after Christmas, everything changes when Jesus comes to the temple for us.

It’s forty days after Christmas. In keeping with the Torah, Mary and Joseph have brought the forty-day-old Jesus to the temple to present him to the Lord. Big things happen on this day.

A man waiting, probably into very old age, for a promise by the Holy Spirit to be fulfilled: Simeon, his life will be changed forever. An eighty-four-year-old widow who spent her life in the temple, ***“worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day”*** (v 37): Anna, her life will be changed forever. And Mary and Joseph, their lives will surely be changed forever. So, for you and me, and for every Christian man, woman, and child, everything will change.

First, there are the parents, Mary and Joseph. They don't look like much when they walk into the temple that day. We forget that. The pictures of the Holy Family are always photo-shopped to make them look somehow magical, mysterious, larger than life. But they were just poor peasant people.

We know that because of the offering they give this day. Leviticus called for a lamb to be sacrificed at the presentation of a firstborn, along with a pigeon or dove. But if you cannot afford a lamb, then it's ***“a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons”*** (v 24). That's the situation with Mary and Joseph. They are poor folk.

Likely, we wouldn't have even noticed them if we had been at the temple to worship that day.

But Mary and Joseph were like any other parents, in a way. When you ask parents what they wish for their child, the answer is always something like happiness, health, a long life maybe that their child would grow up in the faith, maybe that their child would be a “good person.” Very often parents also express their fears about their kids. They hope that they'll be safe from harm. They hope that their child won't be corrupted by what's on television; they pray that their child will never have to be sent off to war. They want what's best for their kids. But it's also about their own feelings, hopes, dreams. They don't want to have their own parental hearts broken.

What do these parents, Mary and Joseph, hear about Jesus? They hear Simeon's prophetic word: ***“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 will be revealed”*** (vs 34–35).

Though Mary and Joseph may appear to be nobodies, the Son they carry to the temple will turn the world upside down. And he won't have our version of happiness. And he will lose his health for the world's sake. And his earthly life won't be a long one. Those in the faith will consider him to be outside of it. He won't be safe from harm; he will hang out with alcohol abusers and prostitutes. And he will be sent off to a war against nothing less than sin, death, the devil, and hell.

He will bring about the fall and rising of many in Israel. Jesus will bring about the fall and rising of the whole world. He is the stumbling stone, Scripture says. Those who are offended by him, those who reject his love, those who want the world to stay its old broken, hurtful way, will fall before him.

But the lowly, the meek, the sufferers, the sinful, the repentant, the hopeless, the lost, the lonely, the world-weary, they will be raised up by him. Simeon was one of them.

He was a man on a mission, always looking, always searching, always living on the promised hope that he would not die until somehow, sometime, some way, he would see the face of the Lord. He would not have peace until he saw the Lord's Christ with his own eyes.

That peace gave a song that we still sing: ***“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation”*** (vs 29–30). Someday we will sing that song perfectly and forever, because of the Child presented in the temple this day.

Anna was one of the world-weary ones. In her eighty-four years, she had seen it all, including the death of her husband and maybe one or more of her children. She lived in a time when her country was occupied by Roman soldiers. Political corruption was rampant, led by rulers who came and went after bleeding their people. There was unfair taxation that fell heavily on the poor.

And even the temple where she took refuge knew greedy priests and faithless teachers.

Yet in the midst of all this, or on the edges, was Anna, faithful, loyal, fasting and praying, and waiting, until this day, until this Child came to the temple. ***“And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem”*** (v 38). Like those crazy shepherds we heard at Bethlehem forty days ago, Anna could not stop speaking of God’s great mercy in the Child who changed the world.

This Child is the one who changes the world. And this is how he does it. He fulfills the Law on our behalf. Every last detail of all that God commanded and demanded is completed in him. For this reason, he is brought to the temple. Mary came to the temple for her ***“purification according to the Law of Moses”*** (v 22). Yes, God had declared that women after giving birth had to offer a sacrifice in the case of a poor family, two turtledoves or two young pigeons.

But this sacrifice wasn't required to pay for some sin in the mother or because childbirth itself created some kind of guilt. Instead, it reminded that the sin of Adam and Eve was always being passed down to the next generation. There was no escaping it, anymore than someone could make his way into the world without being born. And sin always requires a sacrifice.

Though, there was one exception, one who entered the world by birth without inheriting sin. This very child was without sin, because no human father passed it down to him: ***“conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary.”***

And that was God's perfect plan so that Christ could fulfill the Law for those who did enter the world thoroughly corrupted in sin: you and me. Mary's purification was a picture of the purifying we needed; without it, we would be lost forever. Jesus is presented in the temple as our substitute so that we would be purified.

In those moments when we feel, like Anna, world-weary, as if everything around us is out of control, we can cling in faith, as she did, to the promise that God is not only still ruling the universe, but very present right here where we are in our little piece of the world. When he may be our only comfort, he is then closest to comfort.

Like Simeon, our eyes also are opened to see him. In Jesus' weakness here as the forty-day-old baby we see our salvation. In our weakness when we are helpless as a baby, we have the Lord's salvation. The light of the world does not come as a lightning bolt, but as the tender light of Mary's little Son.

It's true, he doesn't stay little. But here already as we see Jesus the little one, we see what he has come to do. Not only will he keep all the Law perfectly in our place, but he will also provide the payment, the atonement, the redemption price, that covers all our sin so that we can come to his place.

Mary and Joseph could not afford a lamb to sacrifice, but there is more to it here than their poverty. The lamb is really the baby in their arms. As John the Baptist pointed him out to us, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. The sacrifice, the final sacrifice will not be made until this Lord returns to the temple again, only to be cast out, pierced and nailed to the tree outside the temple, for us, for our forgiveness. He will fall into the pains of death, into the sorrow of burial, for us. But he will rise to give us new life.

Forty days after Christmas, and our salvation is growing and showing. We are now Simeon, ready to depart in peace. We are now Anna, speaking to one another what God has done. We are Mary, a sword piercing our hearts, until the day that our eyes are opened for good, to see the Lord's salvation, to look on the light of the world, to rejoice in the Lamb of God, to dwell forever in his peace.

Amen