

The Christ-Child Fulfills the Law

Exodus 13:1-2, 11-16 (text); Leviticus 12:1-8; Luke 2:21-24

© Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • December 11, 2016

Beloved congregation of Christ: After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the next two major events in his life are found in our text. First, Jesus was circumcised by his father Joseph on the eighth day of his life. Second, Joseph and Mary went up to Jerusalem 33 days later to fulfill two requirements of the Law: Mary's purification and Jesus' presentation. These two requirements were done before the priest in the temple in Jerusalem.

But what do we celebrate at Christmastime? Most people, especially children, look forward to their presents. But Christmas is about Christ: the eternal God who came down from heaven and assumed human flesh and blood. He was like us in "every respect," except for sin. All his life, he did not commit a single sin in thought, word or deed. When he first came down to earth, he had a mission: to fulfill all of God's laws to the smallest dot so he would be the perfect Lamb of God who would save all his people from all their sins. This is why he said, "*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them*" (Matt 5:17).

Our text in Luke 2 tells us that even in his infancy, Jesus already obeyed the law of Moses, albeit through his parents, when they presented him at the temple. But this text is also very commonly used by most evangelicals as a warrant in "dedicating" their infants in a church service ceremony.

But why did Jesus' family go to the temple, and why was Jesus "presented" at the temple? It was his first act of fulfilling the law, although it was his earthly parents who performed the action. So this third Sunday of Advent, our lesson is, "**The Christ-Child Fulfills the Law**", upon which we will meditate under three headings: **(1) In the Covenant Sign (2) In His Mother's Purification;** and **(3) In His Presentation.**

In the Covenant Sign

Our text tells us that on the eighth day after Jesus was born, he was circumcised, most probably according to tradition, by Joseph. This circumcision on the eighth day was commanded by God to Abraham in Genesis 17:12-14; 21:4; and to Israel in Leviticus 12:3.

Circumcision was the sign of membership in Abraham's family, "*This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised... and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you*" (Gen 17:10-11). Since all Israel descended from Abraham, all male Israelites must be circumcised on the eighth day.

Physical circumcision always signified circumcision of the heart. True circumcision is spiritual, as the Lord commanded Israel, "*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn*" (Deu 10:16). What is the outcome of this spiritual circumcision? They will "*will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live*" (Deu 30:6).

In the New Testament, circumcision signifies the same thing: a spiritual circumcision of the heart. In his rebuke of the Jews before he was martyred, Stephen called them "uncircumcised,"

even though they were physically circumcised, because of their unbelief and disobedience (Acts 7:51). Paul affirms this when he says, *“But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter”* (Rom 2:29). And why does he say that Christians are “the circumcision”? Because we *“worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh”* (Phil 3:3). Unlike the Jews, our confidence in our salvation rests not on an outward sign, but on its inward, spiritual reality.

This is why Paul connects the sign of circumcision to the sign of water baptism. These two signs signify the circumcision of the heart: repentance, forgiveness of sin, and cleansing of the heart. He says, *“In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ”* (Col 2:11-12). Water baptism is the fulfillment of circumcision as the covenant sign of outward membership in the covenant of grace.

Also, Jewish tradition includes naming the child at his circumcision. The angel announced to Mary, *“you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus”* (Luke 1:31; cf Matt 1:21; Luke 2:21). Naming children is very important to them, so that they are given according to the events or circumstances at their birth. For example, Rachel named her son “Benoni,” which means “son of my sorrow,” because she knew she was dying during her delivery. But Jacob later changed his name to “Benjamin,” which means “son of my right hand.”

The name “Jesus” (Grk *Iesous*) is from the Hebrew *Yeshua*, which means “Yahweh saves” or “the LORD saves.” So the angel points to a most important purpose of God in the birth of Jesus: to save his people from their sins. The whole Old Testament—the Law of Moses, the writings, and the prophets—promised a future Messiah who would come to save his people from sin.

But circumcision is also very important to Jews because of God's warning to Abraham in Genesis 17:14, *“Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”* The word “cut off” is used for cutting off of an impurity, and often means the death penalty. For example, in Isa 53:8, the Messiah *“shall be cut off out of the land of the living”* (cf Dan 9:26). Jesus was cut off; he suffered the death penalty by crucifixion. While we deserve to be cut off because of our spiritual uncleanness and impurity, he, the pure and clean, was cut off in our place.

This was how he fulfilled the law on the eighth day of his young life.

In His Mother's Purification

In Exodus Chapter 12, the LORD describes how Passover is to be commemorated, and this carries over into Chapter 13, *“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”* (Ex 13:2).

Passover was celebrated once a year when a Passover lamb is sacrificed in the temple so that the people will remember how the LORD redeemed them from Egypt. Remember that on the night that Israel escaped out of Egypt, God told Israel to slaughter a lamb and paint their doorposts with its blood. When the Angel of Death went through all the land of Egypt, he “passed over” all the houses that had blood on the doorposts. But the Angel killed all the firstborn of the Egyptians, whose houses had no blood on their doorposts.

Therefore, all the firstborn of Israel are consecrated to the LORD after they are born. The verb “to consecrate” means to “make holy,” “keep sacred” or to “devote.” Often, it is used to mean to set someone or something apart for God's use. Who are to be consecrated? The LORD said, “*all the firstborn... shall be the LORD's*” (Ex 13:12). But according to our text in Exodus 13, not only all Israel's firstborn sons, but also all firstborn male animals, must also be consecrated. Two kinds of animals are to be consecrated, both clean and unclean animals. Clean animals such as sheep or cattle must be sacrificed to the LORD at the temple. But unclean animals such as horses, donkeys and camels cannot be used as sacrifice, and they have to be redeemed, or else must they must be put to death.

What about their firstborn sons? Did God require them to be sacrificed like the firstborn male sheep or cattle? Absolutely not, because child sacrifice is an abomination to God! What must be done? They must be redeemed by a sacrifice (verse 13). Why? This is where the parents have some explaining to do to their children. During the annual Passover ceremony, the children asks their parent, “What does this mean?”

The parents' answer is that it is God's reminder to them of the mighty works, the ten plagues, that he did to redeem them from slavery in Egypt. In the tenth plague, all of Egypt's firstborn sons were killed, while Israel's firstborn sons were spared. They would retell the story of God's mighty hand and mercy in Egypt when he heard their groaning and cry for help.

But what does this have to do with our text in Luke where Jesus was “presented” at the temple 40 days after he was born? According to our text in Luke 2, there were two reasons why:

First, “*when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses.*” Who was to be purified? From Leviticus 12:1-8, we read that a woman who has just given birth is considered ceremonially unclean from the day of her baby's delivery. On the eighth day after the baby is born, the baby is circumcised, but she continues to be considered unclean for 33 more days, “*until the days of her purifying are completed*” (Lv 12:3-4). The discharge of blood makes her unclean, and to complete her purification, she goes to the temple to offer sacrifices for atonement. Note also that Luke says “*their purification,*” not “*her purification,*” because this purification most likely includes Joseph who became unclean during the delivery of the infant.

For her purification and for Jesus' redemption, Joseph and Mary offered two young pigeons. Why not a lamb? Because they were poor and cannot afford it (Lv 12:6). From his birth, Jesus was poor and had humble beginnings, born in a lowly manger in the small city of Bethlehem. He endured humiliation so we may be exalted to heaven, and not suffer the shame of eternal hell.

In His Presentation

The second reason why Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple is “*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')*”. In the Law of Moses, God commands them, “*you shall set apart to the LORD all that first*

opens the womb” (Ex 13:11-12). Jesus was “presented” to the Lord was because of the “firstborn rule” commanded in our Old Testament texts, “*as it is written in the Law of the Lord.*” Jesus was their firstborn son (Lk 2:7), and he had to be redeemed with a sacrifice, to remind Joseph and Mary of God’s redemption of their forefathers from Egypt.

This brings us back to the question about “dedication” of infants. Is infant dedication today the same as the presentation of Jesus at the temple after he was born? Certainly not! This passage does not speak of the idea of “dedication” according to the contemporary understanding of offering your child to the Lord with the hope that he will one day be a Christian and serve the Lord Jesus. As Luke says, this occasion of “presenting Jesus to the Lord” (v. 22) was in fulfillment of the Law, stating this in our text three times. The firstborn sons of Israel deserved to die even as the firstborn sons of Egypt were killed (Ex 12: 2,11-12). In short, by “presenting Jesus to the Lord” in connection with His circumcision (Luke 2:21-23), Joseph and Mary were confirming God’s gracious saving covenant with them and Jesus’ role in this covenant.

However, contrary to popular belief, infant dedication was not a universal practice, not in the Old Testament, and certainly not in the New Testament. But many ask: What about Samson, Samuel, and John the Baptizer? In the case of Samson and John, they were “dedicated” (set apart) for special ministries in God’s redemptive plan as “Nazirites”: Samson will save Israel from the Philistines (Jgs. 13:3-5) and John will be Christ’s forerunner (Luke 1:16). Samuel, on the other hand, was consecrated by his mother also as a Nazirite for a lifetime of Temple service (1Sam 1:11, 28).

Thus, Jesus’ “dedication” rite as a model for infant dedication services today raises several baffling issues. Why is the mother’s purification rite not included in the service? Why is there no offering of a lamb or two doves for the redemption of the infant from death? Why are all children in the same family, not just the firstborn son, dedicated? Are those children, like Samson, Samuel, John, and Jesus, being set apart by God for special, extra-biblical work in His (uncompleted!) redemptive plan? These issues are real and serious. None of these old covenant ceremonial rites are still in force in the new covenant because all the Law—including the law about the redemption of firstborn sons—have been fulfilled by Christ (Matt 5:17; Heb 8:4-6).

So the modern concept and practice of infant dedication has no semblance whatsoever to these passages often cited in support of “dedication.” It is infant “dedication” that is *not* in the Bible, not infant baptism. There is no command whatsoever in the New Testament to “dedicate” children in the new covenant, especially in the way that evangelicals today perform it.

Conversely, the reason for infant baptism, like circumcision, is that God *commands* baptism as a sign and seal of membership in the covenant people of God, the church. By so commanding baptism and not “dedication,” God excludes “dedication” in the new covenant.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: We have seen that “infant dedication” as practiced today in most evangelical churches is not a substitute for water baptism. But are there other significant implications of Jesus’ presentation to the temple that might benefit us today? Let us meditate on three things as we look forward to Christmas.

First, all of us are unclean sinners who are under God's condemnation and wrath (Isa 6:5). All our works are as filthy rags before the LORD. All of us are sinners who have fallen short of God's holy requirement. But no, we are not hopeless and helpless. Because Christ came down from heaven and offered himself once for all as a sacrificial Lamb to make us clean and to purify us. Christ has done all the required atoning sacrifice for our complete purification from sin.

Second, Christ is God's only-begotten firstborn Son (Heb 1:6). He is the "*the first to rise from the dead*" to proclaim salvation to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 26:23; cf Col 1:18; Rev 1:5; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:20). But Christ the firstborn Son was not redeemed by God. Death would not pass over him so he might save us from our sins. But because he had no sin, no sacrifice was needed on his behalf. He redeemed us from sin and death with his precious blood, not with the blood of lambs or pigeons, nor with silver or gold (1 Pet 1:18-19).

Third, since Christians are united to Christ in his death and resurrection, we are more than "children of God" (John 1:12); we are also *firstborn* children. Hebrews calls us the "*firstborn who are enrolled in heaven*" (Heb 12:23). Since we are firstborn children, we are also guaranteed an inheritance as if we too were firstborn sons (Heb 9:15), just as all Abraham's descendants are to receive the promised inheritance forever (Exo 32:13). And our inheritance is great, greater than anyone else's, a "double" portion (Deu 21:15-17). And since you are firstborn children of God, you also have the "*firstfruits of the Spirit,*" the "*guarantee of our inheritance*" (Rom 8:23; Eph 1:13-14).

What is our inheritance? Our inheritance is forward-looking. We have been redeemed from sin and death, but not yet completed. We still sin and die. But when our Firstborn Elder Brother returns from heaven, he will give us our full inheritance of all blessings in the heavenly places.

This is what we celebrate during the Advent season. Don't just look back with warm, fuzzy feelings to the First Advent when a child was born in a manger to save us from our sins. Look forward with praise and thanksgiving to our blessed hope, his Second Advent, to complete our eternal salvation. Amen.