

What Child Is This?

In the name of him who is the Light of Revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of his people Israel, dear friends in Christ: Forty days have passed since that first night of excitement – the desperate search to find a place for Mary, in full labor, to deliver the baby; that moment of pure joy when the parents were able to first hold the Christ child in their arms; the shepherds suddenly arriving from out of the darkness with their story of angels appearing to them to announce the good news; the wonder and awe they displayed as they knelt in honor of him. These are all memories for the holy family now. Since then Joseph has with the help of extended family arranged more comfortable and permanent quarters for them. He's begun working in his trade to put food on the table. And together he and especially Mary have adjusted to the hectic routine of caring for a newborn. They have even gotten used to the way their kinsfolk and the other Bethlehem villagers make fun of their Galilean accents. In other words, they have settled into their new normal.

But today, upsetting their new normal schedule, they have two important religious obligations to fulfill. The first is the purification of Mary who, since giving birth to Jesus, has been considered ceremonially unclean. She must undergo the prescribed rites and offer the sacrifices that will allow her once again to join the assembly in public worship. The second religious obligation is the one described in today's Old Testament lesson. As a perpetual reminder that he delivered his people from bondage in Egypt by the death of the firstborn, the Lord decreed that all firstborn sons of Israel (as well as the males of the livestock) belonged to him. The animals were to be sacrificed. Sons had to be redeemed; that is, bought back from the Lord by means of a substitutionary sacrifice. And sacrifices could only be offered to the Lord at his temple in Jerusalem. So it is that starting early in the morning of this, the 40th day, Joseph leads his little family the half day walk from Bethlehem to capital of the Jewish nation.

They arrive shortly after midday and find the city teeming with activity. It's nothing like their tiny hometown of Nazareth or their recently adopted town of Bethlehem, both of which have a population of a few hundred souls. Here the people number in the hundreds of thousands. And that's just counting the permanent residents. At any given time the city also overflows with visitors who can, especially on the three annual pilgrim festivals, significantly outnumber the local inhabitants.

The holy family enters the through what's known as the Water Gate on the south side of the city. There Joseph is interrogated about the reason for their visit by a Roman soldier who is part of the city garrison – an ever-present reminder that Judea is an occupied country. When given permission to proceed, the family begins the long climb through narrow streets and crowded markets to the temple mount. The noise that assaults their ears is overwhelming. There are hawkers hawking for sale every item imaginable. There are buyers haggling with those who wish to sell. There are beggars begging with lamentable cries. There are caged birds clucking, dogs barking, donkeys braying, sheep "bahhhh-ing", and camels ... well, making whatever sound it is a camel makes. It's bedlam; but it's organized bedlam.

Upon arrival, they find things are no less loud and confused on the outer court of the temple. Here Joseph purchases the small birds required for the sacrifices they are to offer. For Jesus, a firstborn son, the Law actually requires a lamb be sacrificed; but allowance was made for the poor since lambs were expensive, so a pair of pigeons or doves could be offered instead.

The purchases made, first Mary completes the rites of her purification. She has to do this before she can go any farther into the temple. That having been done, the couple enters into the court of Jewish women and children. It's there near the gate that leads to the next court, the court of Jewish men, that the couple meets a priest and offers the sacrifice that is for Jesus.

All of it is, on the surface, nothing that anyone would take note of. A poor Jewish couple, one of literally thousands that come to the temple each year for the same purpose, standing in a veritable sea of other people who have come to offer sacrifices for other required reasons ... why, if you'd been there, you'd think "Nothing to see here. Move on." But in fact, you'd be witnessing something profoundly significant – significant for two reasons.

First, that Joseph and Mary are offering a sacrifice to redeem the One who by his sacrifice will redeem the whole world. They are *redeeming* the *Redeemer*. They are fulfilling the Law for the One who will fulfill the Law for everyone.

Second, they are fulfilling a number of important prophecies, one of which we heard a few weeks ago in the Advent season. It's where the prophet Malachi writes "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple." This is key. What made the temple of God different than all the pagan temples scattered over the world was that God was actually in his temple. The pagans set up idols in their temples to represent gods who weren't here, who (at least according to their mythologies) lived someplace else. But the Lord manifested his presence on earth. The tabernacles first, and later the temple built by Solomon was his dwelling place. You could point at the temple and say, "God is in the building".

But Solomon's temple was destroyed. At the time of the exile, in 586 BC, the Lord left the building. His people had turned from him, so he turned from them in order to make them see how that works out. It isn't good. And they didn't like it. It caused them to repent, which was the Lord's desired purpose. And when they did, he restored them to their homeland. He brought the exiles back from captivity. They rebuilt a temple for the Lord. But unlike in the past, the Lord never made a show of entering this second temple. Before, he caused a visible manifestation of his glory to fill the place before taking up residence above the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies. It never happened with the second temple. You couldn't say, "God is in the building." Until today. Mary and Joseph have carried him here. And this manifestation of the Lord dwelling in the midst of his people isn't hidden behind a curtain in the inner sanctuary; he's out here with his people where everyone can see him.

The trouble is that almost no one does. I doubt that even Mary and Joseph understand the significance of what's going on. Sure, on some level they know that their baby is the Christ and Son of God. Thing is, he doesn't act like God. There are no angels seen hovering over his cradle at night. He doesn't glow in the dark. There's no halo floating above his little head. No, he looks and acts like every other baby on the planet. He sleeps most of the time. He fills his diapers and has to be changed regularly. And contrary to the song so loved by children, he cries. He cries a lot: that's how babies express their needs. And when the baby cries, they pick him up and hold him. They comfort him. They rock him. Mary nurses him. And when you're doing that sort of thing, it's easy to forget this our little baby is God and Lord of all.

So no, I rather think that Mary and Joseph fail to see the full significance of their visit to the temple. But there is a guy who does. His name is Simeon. He's a faithful man upon whom rests the Spirit of God. He has longed for the day when the prophecy of Malachi and so many

others would be fulfilled. He's prayed for it fervently. And in answer to his prayers, the Spirit has revealed to him that he will see it in his lifetime. And today is that day.

At the Spirit's prompting, Simeon goes onto the temple grounds searching ... but searching for what? How will he know which of the hundreds of people performing their acts of worship is the one? But then he sees the holy couple making their sacrifice, and he knows at once what is going on: a firstborn son belonging to the Lord is being redeemed. That's got to be him.

He works his way toward them through the crowd, and then stands by waiting for the priest to dismiss them with a blessing. He doesn't want to interfere with the ceremony. Once Mary and Joseph are dismissed they turn toward him. They see an old man with tears of joy in his eyes, eagerly extending his hands toward the baby. "May I?" he asks. Mary looks to Joseph. Her eyes ask, "Do you think it's all right?" He nods. The guy seems harmless enough.

Taking the Christ child into his arms, Simeon speaks the words we know as the *Nunc Dimittus*: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." It's an astonishing outburst and an amazing confession of faith – especially since all he sees with his eyes is an infant a little more than a month old. But what he says is that this baby is both God the Lord and Savior, and here I am holding him in my arms.

It's no coincidence that we use Simeon's words as the post Communion canticle. We use his words because under bread and wine we've seen, touched, and actually consumed the same God in flesh that Simeon held in his arms. And thus like Simeon, we see God's salvation.

Most people, however, do not. Only Simeon and Anna saw him that day on the temple court and knew what they were looking at. And that wasn't due to any special ability they had inherent in them; it was the work of the Holy Spirit who opened their eyes. The same would be true some thirty years later when Jesus returned to the temple courts to teach there. Some few were enlightened. Many more opposed and rejected him.

Of this very thing Simeon goes on to prophesy to Mary, his mother: "This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

Hard words. Parents wonder what their children will become. They hope for good news and a bright future. In the not too distant modern past, it wasn't uncommon for parents to think, "Who knows, maybe our child will become the president of the United States" – a position for which the bar used to be set fairly high, but more recent history has taught us that no serious qualifications are required.

Be that as it may, Simeon's words about what the future of *this* child is must have sounded rather alarming to his parents. What does it mean? That he is appointed for the fall and rising of many speaks of what we Lutherans call Law and Gospel: the Law of God by which the Spirit attacks sinners and brings them to die the death of repentance. It's a painful process, and we don't like it. But it's necessary to prepare us to hear the Gospel by which the Spirit makes alive through the preaching of the crucified and risen Savior. The sign that is opposed or spoken against is the heart of this Gospel; namely the Son of God made flesh and crucified on

the cross to pay our redemption price. That cross is still an offense to most people today; but for believers like us, it is our salvation.

And finally the sword that will pierce also the heart of Mary; what is that? There are some who believe it refers to the anguish Mary will endure herself when she witnesses her son being crucified. For a parent to endure such a thing would indeed be unspeakably horrible; and no doubt Mary suffered immeasurably. The trouble is that it doesn't fit with what follows: "so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." With that in mind, it's better to understand the sword that Simeon speaks of as being the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. What he is saying is that even Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus, will have the Spirit do his work of applying both the Law and Gospel to her. She too must die the death of repentance and be raised through the proclamation of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus. This child is her Savior too; as he is for us and for all who by the Spirit know him to be our light, our life, and our salvation. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!