

Luke 2:22–33  
Purification/Presentation  
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.  
February 2, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

Today we celebrate the feast of the Presentation of our Lord and the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which occurs forty days after the birth of Christ and 33 days after His circumcision. Like so many of the feasts we celebrate, this is an ancient one that is finally making its way back into the church. In the 380s, a pilgrim woman named Egeria writes about the celebration of this feast in Jerusalem. She says:

But certainly the Feast of the Purification is celebrated here with the greatest honour. On this day there is a procession to the Anastasis [church of the Holy Sepulchre]; all go in procession, and all things are done in order with great joy, just as at Easter. All the priests preach, and also the bishop, always treating of that passage of the Gospel where, on the fortieth day, Joseph and Mary brought the Lord into the Temple, and Simeon and Anna the prophetess, the daughter of Famuhel, saw Him, and of the words which they said when they saw the Lord, and of the offerings which the parents presented. And when all things have been celebrated in order as is customary, the sacrament is administered, and so the people are dismissed.

So the Feast of the presentation of our Lord and the Purification of Mary were celebrated in a way reminiscent of Easter quite early in the history of the church. And that's just the first written example we have of the feast. The fact that there was so much emphasis placed upon it means it must have even older roots.

The feast of the Presentation and Purification is also known as “Candlemas.” Like Christmas, but with candles. This is the day people would bring their candles to church for a blessing. There's an emphasis on light and on the lengthening of days, which I'm sure you've noticed by now while driving to church, or while eating dinner. It's not so dark anymore. Spring

is right around the corner and you can sense it. Candles are a reminder that Jesus Christ is the light of the world, the light no darkness can overcome. For awhile, it seems as though the darkness has the last word, but then the light arises and a new day or a new season begins.

The lengthening of the days might remind you of an American holiday: Groundhog Day. Interestingly, there is a connection. An old German tradition contended that if a hedgehog or badger sees his shadow on Candlemas, on February 2, then there will be a “second winter.” The early German settlers to Pennsylvania brought this tradition with them and transferred the duty from the hedgehog to the groundhog. Now, more Americans know about Punxsutawney Phil than about the Presentation of our Lord and Purification of Mary.

In French-speaking countries, a tradition on this day is to eat crepes. This tradition goes back to Pope Gelasius I in the 490s who would offer pancakes to pilgrims entering Rome. The pancakes looked like the golden disc of the sun and reminded the people of the coming light of Spring.

There are so many traditions associated with the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord and Purification of Mary, many connecting it to the coming of light and the coming of spring. We are reminded how people’s lives used to revolve not around the school year, or the fiscal year, or the secular year, but around the church year, around the liturgical calendar. May we also order our lives according to God’s time and the seasons of the church year.

And yet, the traditions associated with this feast only serve as reminders of the truths we hear on this day from God’s Holy Word. We must never let the traditions overshadow the true importance of a day like today. Our concentration tonight is a dual focus on the presentation of the boy Jesus in the Temple and the purification of the blessed Virgin Mary.

Why was Jesus presented in the Temple? “When the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus up to Jerusalem 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’) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.’” The consecration of the firstborn comes from Exodus 13:2 in connection with the Passover and the death of the firstborn. The LORD said to Moses: “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.” God doesn’t want the firstborn because He is greedy. He demands what is first because all things belong to Him anyway. We give the firstfruits to the LORD as a reminder that everything, including our children, everything belongs to Him, the creator of all things.

Later, in Exodus 13:14–15, the consecration of the firstborn is connected directly with the last plague against the Egyptians: “when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’” The consecration and redemption of the firstborn Son is a reminder of God’s punishment upon the Egyptians, but also the salvation for the people of God. As the blood of a lamb protected the firstborn of Israel, so would the blood of the firstborn, the blood of the Lamb of God shed upon the cross, redeem a people for God. Jesus is presented in the Temple as the Firstborn not for His own redemption, but as the sacrifice for your sins. Now the angel of death passes over you and the LORD leads you to the promised land of eternal life.

So Jesus was presented in the Temple as the true Firstborn, the true sacrifice for sins. But why did Mary need purification? She didn't conceive Jesus in the natural way, by man, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. And that which was conceived in her womb was holy, sinless, and perfect. There really was no need for purification. But this is not a purification of sins, like we have with the forgiveness of sins in Baptism or in the Absolution. This is a ritual purification of the mother. When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:4). Jesus was born under the Law and came to fulfill the Law perfectly in our place. So both Jesus and His mother perform all the rites and duties associated with the old covenant, including this ritual purification.

The laws of ritual purification after childbirth go back to Leviticus 12. If a woman bore a male child, she would be unclean seven days. On the eighth day the boy would be circumcised, and then the mother would continue in her uncleanness for 33 days. That's how we come to celebrate this feast on February 2nd. We celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25th, his circumcision eight days later on January 1st, and then his presentation in the Temple and the purification of His mother 33 days later, which always falls on February 2nd. And when the days for her purifying were completed, the mother would bring a year old lamb for a burnt offering to the priest at the Temple, and a pigeon or a young turtle dove for a sin offering. And if the parents couldn't afford a lamb, they would sacrifice two turtle doves or two pigeons. The fact that Mary and Joseph only brought birds to be sacrificed shows their poverty. They couldn't afford a lamb. On the other hand, this seemingly small detail of the story is yet one more reference to Jesus as the true Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Mary and Joseph didn't need to bring a lamb because they had *the* sacrificial Lamb right there with them in the person of Jesus.

Mary was purified not by sacrifices of the old covenant, but by her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. And that's how you are purified as well. In Jesus Christ, the LORD enters His temple and makes payment for the sins of the whole world, including every sin you've ever committed or ever will commit. His death on the cross was the true death of the firstborn in your place, that you might receive the freedom and the blessing as firstborn sons of God in Holy Baptism. Jesus is called holy to the LORD, set apart for the Lord's work, even as you in Him are called holy, set apart for the Lord's work in whatever place God has put you. In the blood of Jesus, all your sins are covered. They are no longer counted against you in the sight of God. Jesus was presented in the Temple to point to your redemption in His blood. Mary was purified at the Temple to point to the purification that you, too, receive in the son of Mary, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Creed.