

December 26, 2021

Luke 2:22-40

“God’s Perfect Gift!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I received a Christmas card this year with these words written on the front: “Little baby on the hay, soon there’ll be another day when nails shall pierce Your hands and feet as You provide our sin’s defeat. Risen Jesus on the throne, we lift our praise to You alone - for You’re the gift that we receive the moment that our hearts believe.” I doubt that the author was specifically thinking of our gospel lesson for this morning when he wrote these words, but the words certainly do capture the witness of Simeon and Anna, who see the Savior and the redemption of humanity. They both receive **God’s Perfect Gift!**

The Song of Simeon is reminiscent of the angels who spoke to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus. And Anna the prophetess is like the shepherds who saw the baby and gave thanks to God and spoke about him. In our gospel lesson Simeon sings: “... my eyes have seen your salvation ... prepared in the presence of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” Then we read this about Anna: “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.” Anna is like the shepherds, who after seeing the baby Jesus, the Bible says, “... they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.” Angels, Shepherds, Simeon, and Anna all testify about Jesus - **God’s Perfect Gift!**

It’s the words of Anna that I really want to concentrate on this morning. I have preached about Simeon in the past, but I have never preached about Anna in particular. Hope you don’t mind me repeating verse thirty-eight. Luke writes: “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.*” Those last words are extremely important. **God’s Perfect Gift** is the redemption of Jerusalem - and as Simeon makes it clear - Gentiles and Israel. The reference to Anna is short, but what she is speaking about to the people is really capturing in a big way the entire setting of this occasion. If you don’t understand what’s going on with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from the start, then you will not understand the significance of Anna’s witness.

There are three separate Old Testament ceremonies captured in our lesson. First, we have the purification of Mary. According to the law she was considered to be unclean for forty days after childbirth and, at the end of the forty days, was required to offer a sacrifice of a lamb and a turtle dove (Leviticus 12:2-4, 6) or, if she was poor, “a pair of turtle doves, or two young pigeons,” which was what the holy family offered. Secondly, we have the presentation of the firstborn to the Lord. This required from Mary and Joseph a redemption price of five shekels of silver. Last but not least, since Jesus was the first born son, he was dedicated to the Lord’s service and was “... called holy to the Lord,” as our gospel lesson says.

Our gospel lesson is just loaded with redemption. And redemption is what Anna is talking about. **God’s Perfect Gift** is redemption. Listen to this definition from the *Lutheran Cyclopedia*: “To ‘redeem,’ literally, means to ‘buy back.’ Redeem as well as redemption are used ... for the act of setting free a captive by paying a ransom or redemption price. In Christian theology the terms stand for our recovery from sin and death by the obedience and sacrifice of Christ, who on this account is called Redeemer.” Now consider that definition in association with what is going on with Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.

Mary is unclean. She is bought with a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons. She is redeemed and made clean by one as a burnt offering, and the other as a fellowship offering, which thereby states that Mary is now clean and connected to the Lord. Two living creatures were the price to be paid to buy Mary back. And all sacrifices of living creatures point to the redemption in Jesus the Savior. Now, this was Mary's firstborn, which is understood as an increase of sin in the world. Of course, Jesus is without sin, but he becomes sin for us and must be purchased with five shekels of silver. The irony, is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the five shekels of silver. Nevertheless, again we have the issue of redemption. Finally, the presentation of Jesus is the fulfillment of all past presentations of firstborns, for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. The holy Son of God is presented as the full price for the sins of the world.

Now, all of this takes place 40 days after the birth of Jesus. The number 40 points to the failure of Israel in the wilderness. The Lord God led them there. Israel was exposed for their failure to see what they needed. When the new generation is at the end of those difficult years, the Lord God says to them, through the teaching of Moses, that they were led there for their humbling and testing that they may see whether they would keep the Lord God's commandments or not. The lesson learned is that we need a Savior to keep the commandments on our behalf and buy us from our slavery to sin, death, and the devil.

In the case of Mary, who comes at the end of her 40 days, her failure to obey the law is emphasized in the sacrifice that must be made. We are to see ourselves in Mary. The 40 days of our lives down here are a constant reminder of our inability to keep the law. We have failure after failure after failure so that we despair of ourselves. However, if we can fast forward to Jesus when he is all grown up, he is successful in the 40 days of his temptation in the wilderness. What we do in the 40 days of our lives down here can never save us. We need something other than our 40 days of living to make us clean. The sacrifice at the end of the 40 days of Mary's uncleanness points to Jesus. He is the one who will have to redeem us and make us clean. Jesus is not only obedient in the 40 days of his temptation in the wilderness, but he is also the sacrifice that reverses our constant failure to be clean.

What we realize is that we are lost and condemned without Jesus - without **God's Perfect Gift!** We are servants and slaves of sin. But we are bid by the Holy Spirit to believe that the Son of God, who became flesh, can set us free from that which plagues us. He who lived a clean life for us also bore our sins in His own body on the tree so that we might die to sin and live in the righteousness that is entirely outside of ourselves. Only by faith in Jesus are we saved. This is the gift from God. But even in faith, when we are trying our hardest to be good Christians, we see our failure and constant need for Jesus, just as Mary a servant of the Lord God had to see. That means that we will never grow past holding on to the redemption of Jesus.

In *Luther's Small Catechism* we have the meaning of the life, sufferings, and death of Jesus Christ spelled out for us in crystal clear language. They capture what the season of Christmas is all about. More than that, they capture what every season in the church year is all about - they capture the 40 days of our lives in this fallen world. Luther writes: "Jesus Christ ... has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; *not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death*, that I may be his own and live

under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity.”

It’s those words: “... not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death ...,” that really hit hard. The act of an individual sin often seems very small in our eyes, but when we realize the cost of a single sin it changes everything. The cost of a single sin required that the Son of God became one of us to absorb into himself every single one of our sins and sufferings and deaths. The fact that the very Son of God did this brings an eternal value to everything he has done for us. The life and sacrifice of Jesus has saved us all, and promises forever life.

We are no longer lost and condemned having been redeemed. For this reason we must emphasize, and you are to say to this to yourself: “Jesus Christ has redeemed *Me!* Jesus Christ has made satisfaction for all *My* sins and has paid the penalty for all *My* guilt! He has risen from the dead that *I* might live!” If I receive by the work of God his **Perfect Gift** as done for me, I will be saved. Therefore, we should not let the multitude and greatness of our sins discourage us to come to Jesus. We should run into his arms, for it says in Psalm 130: “... hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption.” Anna saw this redemption and believed! The question is: do you?

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott