

The Presentation of Our Lord
Hebrews 2:14-18, Psalm 84, Luke 2:22-40
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February 2 is known more as Groundhog Day than the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple. This Feast Day takes precedence over the Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany when it falls on a Sunday. The last time this happened was in 2003.

Only Luke of the four gospel writers includes this story in the lives of Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus. According to Jewish Law, mothers had to go to the Temple for a purification rite 40 days after the birth of a male child, and every firstborn male had to be dedicated or presented to the Lord in the Temple 40 days after the birth. February 2 is 40 days after Christmas.

The practice of presenting firstborn males to the Lord began after the escape from Egypt when the angel of death killed all the firstborn of the Egyptians but passed over and spared the Israelites.

The offering normally associated with this rite was a lamb, unless the family was poor, and then a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons would suffice. Mary and Joseph are a poor couple as they could only afford the pair of birds.

This Jewish rite is somewhat comparable to our baptism ceremony in which infants are offered to God and anointed with the Holy Spirit, and promises are made by parents and godparents to raise the child in the Christian faith. In fact, the language in our Episcopal rite includes the clergy saying to the family, "The Candidate for Holy Baptism will now be presented." And the parents and godparents reply, "I present so-and-so to receive the Sacrament of Baptism." The word "present" is still used.

In a very real way, we present ourselves to the Lord every time we come forward for communion. The Rite I Communion service, which we rarely

use these days, includes this sentence in the prayers the priest says before communion: “And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice unto thee;” (top page 336, BCP)

Each time we come up to the altar – the visible symbol of the nearness of God – and receive our Lord’s body and blood, we are rededicating ourselves to live as divinely inspired and Spirit-filled people. And Jesus rededicates himself to us in the sacramental elements of bread and wine. This routine of walking up, kneeling down and opening our hands to receive is rich with meaning. It is extraordinary every time.

Like some of our Baptist brothers and sisters, we, too, can say we have an altar call every Sunday when we are given the opportunity to say “yes” to God’s invitation to love and serve.

Jesus is a special child, but not above having to receive all the official rites of a law-abiding Jewish family. Jesus, after all, will later be hailed as both God and human being, divine and earthly. **The concept of incarnation is critically important for us Christians.** Holy God has taken residence in the flesh, and, therefore, all created matter has the potential of being infused with heaven. Our understanding of baptism is that God, the Holy Spirit, comes to live in us. We are both human and divine.

Another very important aspect of Jesus as the incarnate God/Man is explained in our lesson from the Letter to the Hebrews this morning. Jesus shares our flesh and blood so he could “become like his brothers and sisters in every respect...” Only in this way can Jesus know all the joys and sufferings of the human condition and be our faithful high priest as well as the one who truly knows our sorrows and suffers right along with us. Can we experience anything Jesus didn’t except maybe childbirth? Knowing this can be very comforting when we feel all alone in our misery. Jesus knows the trouble we’ve seen, from that great Negro Spiritual.

Jesus' young parents are devout. They are good role models for all young couples today, especially those with children. Why is it important to bring our children to church when so many more activities or leisure opportunities compete for our time and commitment on Sunday morning? The Rev. H. King Oehmig puts it this way suggesting that many parents these days are teaching their children to major in minors when they fail to put church first. He writes, "What does a clear dedication to a community of faith by parents do for their children? A lot. It makes clear to them what is of ultimate importance to the parents – something transcendent and beyond the man-made. It gives to young people a consistency and structure – a conscience – in a chaotic, value-free world. It gives them sound, time-tested wisdom and spiritual definition around which to organize their emerging values. It gives them boundaries and principles that are required of responsible people living in a community. Lastly, it gives them a foundation of 'ultimate concern.' It gives them a 'center of gravity' to stand up for and to believe in. It gives them the first and great relationship of all relationships to know, in community, the Living God through Jesus Christ, in whom 'all things hold together.' (Col.1:17)"

I realize I am preaching to the choir. **My parents required me to go to church, and while it was incredibly painful for me, it definitely shaped and guided my future.**

Mary will suffer for being a faithful Jewish mother to Jesus whom she doesn't always understand and then has to watch die a horrible death. Simeon and Anna are the clear elders and wise sages in today's story. Simeon is expectant and hopeful he will see the messiah before he dies. Anna, a widow most of her life, has occupied her time in prayer and fasting at the Temple. They've both seen hundreds of parents bring their infants to the Temple, but this one stands out among them all.

Finally then, let us all pray to become "elders of grace" like Anna and Simeon. May we be able to recognize the divine displayed in all of life in its

many different expressions and then die in peace having been a source of divinity ourselves – lights to brighten the world. AMEN.