

### ***According to the Law of the Lord***

In the name of him in whom we are holy unto the Lord, dear friends in Christ: Three evenings ago we celebrated our Savior's birth and with it the wonder of how God the Son who is the Eternal Word became our brother in human flesh. Like the shepherds we heard the good news first announced by angels. And we went with them in the Spirit to Bethlehem, there to kneel in worship before the newborn King whom they found wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. Today we are still very much in the Christmas season, but have we moved on from Bethlehem and the manger to another event that took place in the life of Jesus during his infancy.

It's the Presentation of our Lord as told to us by St. Luke in this morning's Gospel. It's a delightful story and a richly theological text – one that I've preached several times before. But what stood out to me as I studied it again in preparation for this message is an expression that appears no less than five times in the course of the account. It's worded a bit differently a couple of times that it appears, but it always captures the same idea. It has to do with keeping the Law of the Lord. Thus we hear that Joseph and Mary go to the Temple for their purification "*according to the Law of Moses*". They present Jesus and offer sacrifices for him "*as it is written in the Law of the Lord*". Simeon encounters them while they are doing for Jesus "*according to the custom of the law*"; and so on. Because of this repeated refrain, one might be tempted to think that this text is a legalist's dream; that it's all about obedience to the Law of God. "See? Joseph and Mary scrupulously kept the Law. You should too. Here are the rules. Obey them."

Yeah, that would preach. But it wouldn't make a good sermon. Besides, it would miss the whole point of what happens in this account and why. It turns out that that not all of God's Law is law per se. Indeed, what we call ceremonial law, that is those commands God gave his people Israel about how they were to approach him for worship, are really meant to be ritual enactments of the Gospel. So what I'd like to do this morning is take you through the five times that repeated law expression occurs in order to explain how the Gospel is being revealed.

Here goes: the first time it appears is right there at the beginning. It's said that the holy couple has come to the Temple for their purification *according to the Law of Moses*. Actually, it's Mary, the mother of Jesus, who needs this purification or cleansing. The Levitical Law said that after giving birth to a son, for 7 days a woman was to be considered ceremonially unclean. She was not to appear in public. On the 8<sup>th</sup> day, when the son was circumcised, she'd be reckoned clean again; but she still had to wait another 33 days before she could engage in public worship. On the 40<sup>th</sup> day, she was to go to the temple and offer a sacrifice of a lamb, or if the family couldn't afford one, 2 small birds would be acceptable. Then she'd be considered completely cleansed and could engage again in all festivals and public worship activities.

What's this about? Well, in general, the Law of Moses said that *any* bodily discharge not related to digestion rendered a person unclean. So, when experiencing her monthly cycle, for example, a woman was considered unclean. Men too were considered unclean if they had a nocturnal emission. Likewise abnormal discharges of mucus, or blood and pus from wounds, sores, or rashes made a person unclean. Why? The idea is that life in this sinful world is messy business and we cannot avoid contamination. No, indeed; in fact, what contaminates us comes from the inside. It's a picture of the sin within. We carry it in us, and sometimes it spills out. And it's from the sin within us that we need to be purified. Okay, expanding the idea, when

it comes to messy business and bodily discharges, giving birth rates right up there on top. There's amniotic fluid everywhere, blood; along with pain, screaming, and crying—there's no way to make it pretty. The magnitude of the messy ordeal explains the 40 day delay before the purification could be complete.

Now, hopefully you can see how in purely practical terms, the observance of these laws about bodily discharges would tend to lessen the spread of disease. If you've got the flu or open oozing sores, stay home and don't give what you've got to anyone else. As it applied to new mothers, it ensured that they would be excused from attendance at otherwise required religious ceremonies for more than five weeks, allowing time for their recovery from labor. That was good for her and the baby. So in some ways these laws make sense purely for health reasons. But again, they are meant to be theologically instructive. With respect to mothers, their messy, painful labor to give their babies birth is a picture of the cross: how Jesus gives us new life through his suffering and the discharge of blood and water that poured from his wounded side. That the mother was to be considered unclean until the 8<sup>th</sup> day when her son was circumcised is a picture of how it's in the shedding of the Son's blood to keep the covenant that she is made clean – again, a foreshadow of the cross. That her full purification comes 40 days later when a sacrifice is made for her is a picture of how it takes the death of a substitute to take away sin, which is yet another foreshadow of the cross. And finally, this whole idea that one has to be purified or cleansed before coming before the Lord is a picture of Christian Baptism – the water and Word that cleanse from sin by union with Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection. So there's a lot going on here.

Moving on to the second and third instances in which the phrase "*according to the Law of the Lord*" appears in today's Gospel, they both have to do with Jesus. That is to say, Joseph and Mary are fulfilling the law as it applies to him. The back story on this command of God is today's Old Testament reading. The Lord has just freed his people from slavery in Egypt. He did it by the tenth and most terrible plague in which he slew the Egypt's firstborn. The firstborn of Israel did not die because they were under the protection of the lamb's blood on their doorposts. Thus the angel of death passed over their homes and spared them.

The Lord wanted to ingrain this into his people: that they were delivered from bondage by the death of the firstborn and the blood of the lamb that died to save them. So he set up this lasting ordinance to remind them of it. He said the firstborn males of Israel, both human and livestock, belong to me. If it's an animal, you must kill it. If it's your son, you must redeem him, that is, buy him back from me. And that's what Joseph and Mary are here to do. Because Jesus is a firstborn son, he must be redeemed, bought back from God – which is rather ironic: they are here to redeem the Redeemer, the one whom all these things point to. It's even more ironic when you consider that *this* firstborn Son belongs to the Lord in a unique way. God really is his Father. Thus when Joseph and Mary buy him back, they are doing it for all of us.

How do they do that? As we heard in the text, the price is the sacrifice of a lamb – the same price that saved the firstborn of Israel when they were slaves in Egypt. So now we have a lamb slain to redeem from God the Lamb of God who will be slain to take away the sins of the world and redeem us all from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Did I mention that this is a richly theological text? There's a lot more going on here than meets the eye. And that's just it: when it happens nobody knows it. No one there can see what's really going on.

Except one guy named Simeon. And it happens the fourth time the expression occurs. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him "according to the custom of the Law", Simeon, by the power of the Holy Spirit resting upon him, sees what no one else does. We're

told that he was a faithful man, righteous and devout. This doesn't mean he was sinless by any stretch of the imagination, but rather that he trusted in the grace of God that takes away sin through sacrifice. We are also told that in some way the Holy Spirit had communicated to him that he would see the Lord's Christ before he died. We can picture him, then, as he's become quite old, waiting in eager anticipation for this promised glimpse of the Savior. He knows from the writings of the Prophet Malachi that the Lord whom Israel seeks will suddenly appear in his Temple in Jerusalem. That had been foretold. So that's where Simeon expects to see him, thus he never strays far from the Temple.

And now comes the propitious day. The Holy Spirit leads him onto the Temple court at just the right time and tells him, "Look now and you will see." You can imagine him surveying the crowds there, looking this way and that. What's he looking for, though? Probably someone whose appearance stands out in some glorious way; maybe someone wearing a glowing halo like in those medieval paintings. But no, it's all business as usual. All the regular functions of the Temple are going on like they always do. The people here all look ordinary. It had to be frustrating. "He's here, but I can't see him."

But then he spies the holy couple making the sacrifice to redeem their son "*according to the custom of the Law*", and the light goes on. He sees. He sees what the Law is meant to reveal. He sees what the Law reveals only to those who have their eyes opened by the Holy Spirit. He sees in the Law being fulfilled the One who came to fulfill all the Law and the prophets. He sees the Christ revealed through the sacrifice of redemption.

Working his way through the crowd, he rushes over to the parents of Jesus just as they are coming away from the priest who sacrificed their lamb and collected its blood to throw on the burning altar as the offering. Joseph carries the dead lamb. Mary holds the living Christ. With trembling hands Simeon reaches out for the child. "May I?" his eyes inquire of the virgin mother. First time parents tend to be very protective of their babies. They're not likely to hand them over to any stranger who asks. But something about Simeon tells her it's all right. Maybe it's the unbridled joy written all over his face. Whatever it is, she consents.

Taking the infant Christ Child into his arms, Simeon then utters the familiar words of the hymn we call the Nunc Dimittis: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared before the face of all peoples, a Light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." It's a profound statement of faith. Simeon understands that he holds against his chest God in the flesh, the one person in whom God and man have come together in order to bring salvation to all mankind by ending forever our separation from God due to our sin. He calls Jesus the Light of revelation to the Gentiles, foreshadowing what Jesus will say about himself later, "I am the Light of the world". He also calls Jesus the glory of Israel. And what was Israel's glory? Just this: Israel was the one nation on earth in whose midst God chose to place his gracious presence. That's what Jesus is: God's gracious presence on earth, the One through whom we have peace with God. Simeon found that peace that passes all understanding in the child he held in his arms. And having found it, he was ready to depart this world a joyful man.

It's not a coincidence that we use Simeon's song of praise in our worship services immediately after receiving Holy Communion. Having received Christ's body and blood under the sacramental elements, we are saying the same thing he did. "I've seen God's salvation in Christ with my own eyes. Having heard God's Word and received it in faith, I've seen it, I've touched it, and I've tasted it. And I know for certain the Lord is good. He has given me his

peace. Mary and Joseph marveled at the things Simeon said about their child, Jesus. And so should we each time repeat Simeon's words.

At the conclusion of today's text, we are told that when the parents of Jesus had performed *everything according to the Law of the Lord*, they returned to their hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. It's the last time the phrase we've been looking at appears in the text. And I want to make sure we understand it. When it says they did everything according to the Law of the Lord, obviously they did not. What I mean is that they were both sinners incapable of doing everything that the Lord commands in his Law. No doubt they had their quarrels, as couples do; they had doubts and fears, which means they didn't always trust in the Lord – and that's idolatry. I could go on, but you get the idea. They didn't do *everything* according the Law of the Lord. What they did was to perform the Law's required rituals about purification and sacrifice that pertained to the birth of a child. And as we've seen, those rituals are not Law; they are Gospel.

In the same way, God has given us Gospel rituals to perform, namely Baptism and the Lord's Supper, along with all the parts of the Divine Service of the Church. They are for our purification and our redemption from sin. By hearing the Word and performing them we receive the righteousness of Christ who really did perform and fulfill *everything* according to the Law of the Lord for us. And through them the Holy Spirit enlightens our hearts and opens our eyes to see Jesus our Savior here in this Temple when we come to worship according to the Law – that is, the Gospel – of our Lord. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***