

Purified

Luke 2:21-33

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

Do you know what I was doing a week after my daughter was born? Neither do I. But I’m pretty sure it involved sleeping, changing diapers, and just trying to get through the day.

Much respect goes to Mary, who was ready to present herself and her newborn son at the temple in Jerusalem.

Respect because first off, she just had a baby. So let’s assume that at the very least she’s exhausted, but she may also be in some pain. Respect because in this state she and Joseph travel from Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem. True, that’s a journey of less than 10 miles, but they have no car and no other known means of transport other than walking. (It turns out that the donkey we love so much in our nativity scenes isn’t anywhere in the Bible).

This gives us an indication of how much they valued those ceremonies at the temple. For this visit, they were there for purification rituals for Mary and Jesus, but also to have Jesus circumcised and officially named. These were things that couldn’t wait for a six-week maternity leave. It was important to have the baby start his life as a member of the covenant community. And so, on the eighth day, Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple.

When he is circumcised, Jesus is literally marked as one who belongs. His identity as part of the Nation of Israel is irreversibly etched into his flesh. As part of that same ceremony, in

addition to receiving his community identity, Jesus receives his personal identity. His name. One of the prayers said at the circumcision offers praise to God for the safe and healthy delivery of this new child. But rather than saying ‘this child,’ they said the name of the child. The baby’s name becomes official in a prayer, reinforcing the idea that his own personal identity is connected with God.

Of course, Mary goes to the temple not only to witness all this, but to receive her own purification rituals. She is already assured of her identity as part of the covenant community. She is here, following giving birth, to be fully purified and restored to that community. Part of me doesn’t like this tradition. I bristle at the idea that just because Mary gave birth, she is impure. That this natural process somehow excludes her, even temporarily, from her community. But another part of me loves this tradition. Because you have to admit, giving birth does temporarily remove you from your normal surroundings. You step back and enter into a different mode for a while. And in our culture, the return to community is gradual and lengthy. But for this culture, the return to community is definite, and happens shortly after the birth.

There are all kinds of things that separate us from our various communities in life. Sometimes it’s physical distance. Or we have a family emergency or other change in our priorities. Maybe it’s a medical problem. One of the greatest things that separates us is sin. Call it what you will, but any time we do something wrong – from the very small to the extreme – we cause a rift in our communities. And for the most part, we don’t have ways to purify and welcome people back into the group.

One of the reasons Americans often don’t like to admit they’ve done something wrong is that we have no official way to atone for that and move forward. They are afraid, and rightfully so, that they will be labeled forever, not really forgiven. But we are gathered here this morning

because our primary identity is not American, but Christian. We are both, and live with both cultures, but as Christians we know something about forgiving and being forgiven.

That's why John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, was so fond of Covenant Renewal services. He knew that we all have a tendency to sin, to fall short, to damage our community relationships. And it's important to have official ways that we acknowledge that brokenness and also accept the overwhelming grace of God. So I would invite us now to turn to our inserts. As we start a new year, let us admit our imperfections and seek purification and a return to community. Amen and amen.