

“Presented to Be Presentable”
Luke 2:22

Today is just the sixth day of Christmas. According to the song, we should expect to receive today from our true loves, six geese a-laying, five golden rings, four calling birds, three French hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge in a pear tree. I don't think Jesus got any of those on the sixth day of His life. In fact, the gifts from the wise men hadn't even been given yet. In real time, Jesus was a mere six days old. Were they still in the stable there in Bethlehem, unable to get a room in the inn because of the census? The Bible doesn't say. It is a virtual certainty that the holy family was still in Bethlehem. Having just delivered her baby six days prior, Mary would be in no condition to make the long trip back to Nazareth.

No, Joseph kept his wife Mary and the infant Jesus in Bethlehem for a while. Today's Gospel reading describes an important, and fascinating, event that took place when Jesus was forty days old. In fact, the 40th day of any firstborn son's life was important to Jewish families, for it was the day of their consecration. And since Bethlehem was only a handful of miles from Jerusalem, Joseph and Mary stayed in Bethlehem at least until then so that they could consecrate Jesus in the temple.

The reason the consecration of the firstborn sons was so important is that it had its roots all the way back to the greatest event of Israel's history—the Passover. It was at the Passover that God provided deliverance for His people by bringing death to the firstborn sons and animals of Egypt, but He spared the firstborn sons of Israel through the shedding of the blood of innocent lambs.

The night before all this took place, God explained to Moses that because the Lord would spare the firstborn sons of Israel from death, they would now belong to Him. Since these sons would have died without God saving them, they would now be consecrated to God to serve Him all their lives. The parents of these firstborn sons gladly and willingly consecrated their children to the Lord in thanksgiving and praise for their mighty deliverance. Thus, the consecration of the firstborn sons became a very joyous and eagerly anticipated event. It renewed the relationship of grace God established with the Israelites many years earlier, and it reminded the people of how they were delivered from the slavery of death to the freedom of life in God.

But there was one other aspect of this consecration ceremony that is particularly relevant—the redemption. You see, God provided a way whereby the parents of these firstborn sons would consecrate their sons to the Lord but then they could buy them back to themselves. This was called the redemption price. For five shekels of silver, parents would buy their own sons back (in other words, redeem them) so they could raise their children as their own.

Now, why did the firstborn sons have to be forty days old before they could be consecrated to the Lord and then perhaps also be redeemed (bought back) for the redemption price? The answer to that lies in God's law concerning the mother. Listen to Leviticus chapter 12: "The Lord said, 'A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days...On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding. She must not touch anything sacred or go to the sanctuary until her days of purification are over...When the days of purification are over, she is to bring to the priest...a year-old lamb...and a young pigeon or dove...for an offering. (The priest)

shall offer them before the Lord to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean...If she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons.’”

So, the firstborn sons of Israel had to be forty days old before they were consecrated to the Lord because that is how long the mothers had to wait to be purified after giving birth. That is what faithful Mary did in the text. Forty days after giving birth to our Lord, Mary and Joseph went to the temple in Jerusalem for her purification and for Jesus’ consecration to the Lord. Being poor, she and Joseph could not afford a lamb for the purification, so they brought two doves or pigeons. (Theological insight: If you think about it, Mary and Joseph did in fact bring a lamb because they brought Jesus, the very Lamb of God who would offer Himself, not just for Mary’s purification, but for that of the whole world!)

And this is what makes the presentation of Jesus such an important event, not just for His parents, but for all people including you and me today. If Jesus had just been another firstborn son of an Israelite couple, all that I have said so far today would be interesting at most. But Jesus is God in the flesh and what He did He did not for Himself but for others that they may benefit.

Let’s start with the purification of Mary. Here came Mary and Joseph to the temple in obedience to the laws of purification and consecration. Mary came to where God could be found—in His house, in His temple—so that she would be made clean and restored to the full fellowship of the Lord.

Is this not why you and I continually come to church, to this house of the Lord—to be made clean of what defiles us and to be restored to the full fellowship of God? We don’t come to worship simply to find out who else is showing up, or to critique Sunday fashions, or to pay our dues. We come to confess to the Lord the sins with which we have offended Him during the

week; the sins of thought, word, and deed which have made us unclean and unworthy of God's blessings. We come to hear those precious words of absolution, of forgiveness of all our sins, not on our merit, but because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the holy and innocent Son of God. We come to be made clean, holy, and pure in God's sight because a Lamb was offered for us on the altar of the cross; a sacrifice made once but whose righteousness avails before God for all time.

So even as Mary went to the temple for her purification, we come to this temple of the Lord to be purified in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ. But more, even as Jesus was presented to the Lord to be the permanent (and eternal) Servant of God, so we, by His grace, are presented to God for His service here on earth, and to be His firstborn sons in Christ. In other words, Jesus was presented so that you and I would be presentable to the Father in heaven.

It is no coincidence that the verb St. Luke used to describe how Jesus was "presented" in the temple is the same verb that Jesus Himself used from the cross when He literally said, "Father, into Your hands I *present* My spirit." So even as our Lord was lifted up in the arms of Simeon when He was forty days old and was presented to the Lord for His service, so Jesus presented Himself, with arms uplifted on the cross, to His Father in His greatest act of service—giving His life for the sinners of the world.

But from that cross, Jesus presented not only Himself to the Father. He also presented all the world so that all who believe in Him would be made sons of God. The Bible says in Colossians 1:22,23: "But now God has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in His sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the Gospel."

So, the presentation of Jesus in the temple was just the beginning of His work of ultimately presenting you and me before the Father as holy and without accusation. Christ came to dwell among us in the flesh that the world would be caught up in His redemption begun at the manger, revealed in the temple, and fulfilled on the cross and empty tomb. Christ came in the flesh not only to be the glory of Israel, but, as Simeon said at His presentation, to be a light for revelation to the Gentiles as well. And this revealing to the Gentiles is the next big event in the life of the infant Jesus. We'll be talking about that next week.

Today we rejoice that Jesus was presented to the Father as the firstborn of all firstborns, as son of all sons, to fulfill God's law for us all perfectly and to be our redemption. To Him be the glory now and forevermore. Amen.