

## Luke 2:22-32

Today is the fortieth day after Christmas. Now Epiphany is not a penitential season as with Lent, but to put things in perspective, if Christmas was Ash Wednesday, today would be Easter Sunday. You and I have not been sitting in sackcloth and ashes the past forty days, but Mary was. According to the Law, after Mary gave birth to Jesus, and after His circumcision, she remained in seclusion, considered unclean, until the fortieth day when she then entered the temple to present her child to the Lord and to offer up the proper sacrifice.

It was quite a ritual. Mary came into the temple through the Gate of the Firstborn. She waited at the gate while incense was offered in the Holy Place. She then walked up to the highest step which led to the Court of the Women and handed her sacrifice to the priest. He sacrificed it and sprinkled her with some of its blood. She then paid five pieces of silver into the treasury. After all this, she joined Joseph in the temple.

How did you come into God's House today? Not like Mary, because I do not see, or hear, any animals waiting to be sacrificed. And yet, very much like Mary. For, like her, you have brought your silver coins for God's treasury. But even more, as she entered the House of God to present her child Jesus, you also enter in with Christ.

The proper sacrifice to offer back then was a lamb. But not everyone could afford such an expensive offering. And so God allowed His people to offer a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Because Mary and Joseph were poor, this was her offering. And yet, had Mary consulted with a lawyer--one steeped in the Scriptures--she could have entered the temple without bringing a sacrifice at all. For within her very hands she was carrying the Lamb of God. The sacrifices were commanded in order to redeem the firstborn sons back from God. At birth they belonged to Him since God rescued Israel's firstborn sons in Egypt--the angel of death passed over their houses because of the blood of the lamb brushed on their doorposts. But since Mary's firstborn Son would be offered up on a cross as the Sacrifice for every sinner, no other sacrifice from her was needed.

You and I, it's safe to assume, do not fully appreciate the fact that we can freely enter God's House today. We do not give too much thought to the process of walking up the church steps, opening the door, walking in, and taking our seat. We are entering into the presence of the holy God. This is not our house--I don't care whose hands were used to build it--this is God's House. This is His altar. This day is His day. This service is His service. And you and I, like Mary, have been living in seclusion. For her it was forty days. For us, the past six days.

Mary came into the House of God considered unclean in the eyes of the Law. And so are we. In the eyes of the world, of society, we are no more unclean than everyone else. Good enough to present ourselves to God. Do you doubt what I say? Then listen carefully to all the eulogies out there. No mention of Christ. But what is mentioned, and offered to God, are all the good things that can be recalled about the person in the coffin. But the eyes of the world are blind to the truth. We are steeped in sin, covered with it. It is the condition in which we are born and live. Mary did not deny this truth, as most do today. She did not presume to enter God's House on her own merit, with nothing in her hands. She came into the presence of God with the proper sacrifice, which she thought were the two young turtledoves, but in truth her sacrifice was the child Jesus.

The way you enter God's presence today is the way you will enter His presence the day you die. You enter in with Jesus. No other sacrifice is good enough. You, the baptized, come into the House of God

unclean on the inside, but covered, through baptism, with the innocence of Christ. This is why Simeon was waiting in the House of God for Jesus. This is why, after cradling Jesus in his arms, he cried, *“Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace.”* Mary dare not have entered God’s presence without Jesus, and Simeon dared not enter his grave without Jesus.

And so with us. You enter God’s House like Mary--holding Jesus in your arms through your baptism into Him. And you leave God’s House like Simeon, having seen Christ in the bread and wine. And you, like him, are prepared to die. Jesus is at the center. Without Him, no one can come into the presence of God. Not Mary, not Simeon, not us, not anyone. Turtledoves won’t do it. Even a young lamb won’t do it. Our own good works, or good intentions won’t do it. Nothing about us is good enough to present to God. It must be Jesus.

And this is why, as you enter in God’s House with Jesus, baptized into Him, you are given more of Jesus here...in the words that are spoken and sung, in the Sacrament on the altar. From Invocation to Benediction, it’s all about Jesus. He fills you with His gifts, with His very self, so that you, like Simeon, can leave this House and not be afraid to meet God in death.

Simeon could die in peace not because he was good enough for God, but because of Jesus. Christians, it is assumed, are better than most. This is simply not true. Mary was not without sin, nor was Simeon, nor are you, nor me. You do not have a righteousness of your own to hold up. But you do have Jesus. He is your Righteousness. When Mary carried Jesus into the temple, she was carrying her righteousness before God. When Simeon held Jesus in his arms, he was holding his righteousness. No one is right before God on their own. It is Jesus who makes you right with Him. No wonder Satan tries to keep us away from Jesus. No wonder he seeks to downplay Holy Baptism, and to keep the baptized away from the Word and Sacrament. But he could not prevent Mary from coming to God’s House with Jesus, nor could he keep Simeon away from Jesus there.

Do you see how necessary is the House of God? Simeon did not wait for Jesus at the store, or at the clubhouse, or at his home. He waited for Jesus in the House of God. God’s House is where Mary came with Jesus, and it’s where Simeon cradled Jesus in his arms.

Today you are like Mary, and you are like Simeon. You have come in with Christ, and He is here now for you. He does not call you unclean. He calls you forgiven. There is no more seclusion for you. Jesus joins Himself to you. He takes away your sins, and He gives you His righteousness, His innocence. God does not look for good in your life. He who is good hung on a cross for you. God forgives all of you.

Today you are Mary, carrying Jesus into the presence of God, presenting Jesus to Him as the true Sacrifice for your sins. And today you are Simeon as you, also, see Jesus face to face in the Sacrament. And then you, too, can depart this House, and this life, in peace. Amen.