

“Our Innocence Purchased and Reclaimed”

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December 28, 2014

Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The texts for this message are the lessons for today.

December 28th on the church calendar is a particularly dark day – the Commemoration of the Innocents of Bethlehem. Nazareth was a nowhere kind of town – perhaps as few as six little boys, infants and toddlers under the age of two were murdered by Herod just to assure his place on the throne. One would have been too many – and young Jeshua ben Josef would face a different Herod more than 30 years later on His way to death. The Herod family had a twisted and horrid family tree and this Herod – Herod the Great was a particularly evil branch. How evil? As he lay dying he had his own son murdered because he was certain his son had plotted his death.

It seems there was always a price of some sort on the head of Jesus – some plot to kill him. Even his own parents had to pay a ransom for him – but that’s the way things worked in ancient Israel. All Jewish mothers and fathers had to buy their sons back from God. It’s true. Ever since the Exodus, when God freed Israel from Egypt after that last and terrible plague that took the lives of all the first born sons of Egypt and spared the first born sons of Israel, every first born son of Israel belonged to God and parents had to redeem them by presenting them in the Temple with a substitute sacrificial offering.

In the case of peasants like Mary and Joseph, that offering was “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” In that way, their firstborn who was actually God’s son according to God’s command and by his conception in this once and for all time case, became their son. The law reasoned that you bought back your firstborn son by paying off a longstanding debt to God. On this day of the Commemoration of the Innocents colliding with the Songs of Simeon and Anna that is where the Gospel begins exactly forty days after Jesus’ birth. That is certain because Luke referred to “A purification according to the Law of Moses.” The Law of Moses specified that exactly forty days after giving birth, a Hebrew woman and her newborn child underwent a ritual called a mikvah. A mikvah was a ritual bath or washing – a cleansing made necessary by the presence of blood that was shed during the process of giving birth; human blood was considered a spiritual as well as a physical contaminant, making those who came into contact with it, unworthy and therefore not permitted to enter the Temple.

To do a mikvah, one went to a Mikvah – there’s one on the corner of Snelling & Summit if you wondered if they still exist. A Mikvah is a pool directly fed by spring water or rain water, that deep enough for an individual to stand in and be fully immersed in water over one’s head. You walk into a mikvah one downward step at a time and after being immersed you ascend out of the water by another set of steps on the other side.

This was no ordinary bath for Mary and Jesus; it was a ritual bath that had to be done properly with an attendant standing by to watch making sure every ordinance was followed. Like any bath, Mary wore only her skin, no jewelry allowed and if she had a bandage of any kind, it had to come off. Her hair was completely unbraided or worn in a twist. The idea was that any woman could only be ritually pure enough to enter God’s presence in the courts of the Temple if pure water had flowed over every last square centimeter of their body – the same for this first-born son.

All of that brought Mary, Joseph and Jesus to the Temple and all of it was necessary for them to begin a “normal” life as a Hebrew family, just like every other Hebrew family. Mary clean and Jesus paid for.

But then things changed, as they often did in Jesus’ life. Newly purified and newly bought back or redeemed, if you will, Jesus is brought into the Temple where Simeon sees Him. At just the right moment, Simeon swooped in, led by the Spirit, and scooped up the baby and in front of His startled parents began to sing a song that strangely echoed the words of the angel that had visited both Joseph and Mary before Jesus’ birth, to assure them that this strange life they were to have was God’s doing as they raised a child named “Yeshua,” Jesus, which means “God saves.”

Simeon, wrote Luke, was “looking forward to the consolation of Israel.” And so was Anna who had been looking for “the redemption of Jerusalem,” by spending her days and nights in constant prayer and fasting in the Temple courts. Both of them, in other words, were doing their absolute best to be pious and devout servants of God, when their efforts were interrupted by God, taking over and bringing about the one thing their prayers and fasting and devotion could not accomplish: the redemption of Israel.

Spiritual life in Israel was not simple – full of rituals and sacrifices that make us look like spiritual lightweights for only coming to worship on most Sundays. There’s more to a Christian’s

spiritual life than church attendance, but you get the idea, I think. The Old Testament God's people were "under the Law" as St. Paul wrote, with its impossible demands. Jesus, himself, was born under that law, Paul went on, "to redeem those (us, too) from under that law, by keeping it perfectly as we could not – paying the price for our righteousness. Laying down His sinless life assured eternally that *Our Innocence Was Purchased and Reclaimed*. That is true for all who believe and who call on His name as Savior. The salvation that Simeon saw was the freedom from that Law.

All of which brings us, at last, to the usually ignored blessing Simeon gave to Jesus and Mary and Joseph. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

Allow me to paraphrase: Because of Jesus, the powerful will be knocked off their high towers and disgraced and the powerless and oppressed, those with no voice will be lifted up by grace. When He walked this earth and in every age and to all people the very person of Jesus and the Gospel is a confrontation with our need for a Savior – and receiving the Savior God sent. Those who don't believe they need a Savior or don't particularly care for Jesus hate and despise Him, just as Simeon said. What startles me most is that Simeon says to Mary, humble sweet obedient Mary "because you are the one who gave Him birth, His life is going to break your heart."

Mary no doubt wailed at the death of her son as those other mothers in Bethlehem had wailed and wept more than 30 years earlier. She and Joseph had obediently bought Him back, kept Him safe by running as refugees/illegal immigrants to Egypt. They had paid a blood price – not truly understanding that Jesus would, one day, pay that price for all of humanity for you and me. Because Our Innocence was Purchased and we have been Reclaimed by God we can live now and into eternity giving witness to this love Divine all loves excelling, speaking for those who have no voice and are oppressed and knowing we are owned, claimed and loved by God through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Now may almighty God, who wonderfully created us and even more wonderfully redeemed us, in His mercy let us share in the divine life of the One who came to share our human life.