

1 Sermon, December 26, 2010

Texts: Luke 2:21-35, Exodus 13:11-16

Title: "Holy Dedication"

The idea of preaching about the dedication of Jesus in the Temple may seem strange in itself. After all, Jesus didn't do or say anything important.

And to preach about something that involves animal sacrifice? Circumcision? Women being ceremonially unclean after giving birth? Yecch!

But it's there in the Bible, and it's there for a reason.

What it tells us is that Jesus was brought up in obedience to the Commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In Exodus 13, God commanded that every first-born male should be redeemed by an offering to the Lord. An animal would be sacrificed for every first-born male, even if that male was a donkey. So a sacrifice was made for Jesus, his mother's first-born.

In Genesis 17, God issues a commandment to Abraham that he and all the males of his household should be circumcised, even the slaves. This should be practiced by all Abraham's descendents through the generations. If they are not circumcised, they will be cast out of the family. Literally, the phrase used is "cut off" from my people.

So Jesus was brought up in obedience to that commandment.

Lastly, in Leviticus 12, the LORD commanded that a woman would be ceremonially unclean after she gave birth; the time she was unclean would be longer if a daughter was born than if a son was born. At the end of her time of being ceremonially unclean (forty days for a male baby), she should go to the Priests and offer a lamb and a pigeon. If she couldn't afford a sheep, she would take two two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest would make atonement on her behalf, so she would be clean."

All of this seems very strange, until you look at the reasons for these rituals.

The sacrifice for the first-born is to remind the children of the sacrifice of a lamb when the angel of death passed over the Hebrew people in Egypt. It is symbolic of God's strength to save, just as God saved the people and brought them out of Egypt.

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Circumcision is a sign of covenant relationship. It is an outward sign of being part of God's family.

The purification of a woman after she's given birth is all about some things being clean and unclean, some things holy and some unholy. So it helps God's people distinguish between those things that are God's and those things that are not God's. The things that are God's also include caring for the poor, honoring one's father and mother, and honesty. So the purification of a woman after she's given birth is a sign that we need to choose to obey God, and follow in God's ways.

All of these senses: a reminder of God's strength, covenant relationship, a reminder to strive to be pure – all are present at Jesus' dedication.

And then enters Simeon, an old man who was "Looking forward to the consolation of Israel." Simeon was waiting for the messiah, the one who would comfort the people, and lead them to a new sense of holiness.

Raymond Brown, a leading scholar on the birth stories, says that Simeon would have been one of the Anawim, a group at that time who were intentionally poor, living in expectation of God's salvation.

And what does Simeon speak about?

First, God's Salvation:

29 "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word; 30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,

Second, Simeon speaks about God's Covenant – God's special relationship with Israel. But more than that, God is expanding the covenant to non-Jews, too:

my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared
in the presence of **all** peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the
Gentiles -- and for glory to your people Israel."

Third, Simeon speaks of Purity of inner thoughts:

33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was
being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to
his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the
rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35
so **that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed**—and a sword
will pierce your own soul too.

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Then there was Anna, the prophet, a woman who had lived into her eighties, who despite her age, lived in uncomfortable quarters in the temple. On seeing Jesus, she began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. She was also probably one of the Anawim, those intentionally poor people who lived in expectation of God redeeming their nation.

Isn't it amazing how all that is packed into this little story about Jesus, and Jesus hasn't done anything yet?

Through this story of dedication, Luke let's us know that Jesus is very important: Important because he follows the laws of the Old Testament; Important because not one, but *two* prophets speak about him in the temple.

The law affirms Jesus, the prophets affirm Jesus, and the law and prophets is the name that Jewish people of that time used to refer to the Hebrew Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament.

It's a story about some ancient ritual practices that seem very foreign to us, but it tells us of some things that are still relevant today:
God's saving power,
God's enduring covenant relationship and
Our choices whether to be pure in our actions or not.

Jesus' dedication in the temple helps us ask ourselves if we are dedicated to the Lord.

Do we trust in God's saving power?

Do we do what we can to maintain our relationship with God?

Do we choose what we do based on what we believe to be God's will?

I recently ran across an article written by Frank E. Wismer III, , a recently retired Army colonel and chaplain. He wrote about how, while serving with UN peacekeeping forces in Bosnia, he saw some prayer beads in a mosque that looked a lot like Catholic rosary beads. He was intrigued. Asking about them, he discovered that these Muslim "rosaries" had thirty-three beads, one for each year of the life of Christ. He was reminded that Jesus is an important figure in the religion of Islam.

Wismer went to a Mufti in Bosnia, who taught him how to pray the beads. The words start out:

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God is Great.

God is one.

Praise be to God the master of the Universe.

He found that when he prayed the beads, it made him less anxious, something he needed when he recently served as a chaplain in Iraq.

Wismer discovered that in Iraq, men carried these beads everywhere, and often prayed the beads in public, when standing in line, or waiting for a bus, and so on.

When he, as a Christian, used those same beads, a sense of peace came over him, and when a young man threw a rock at the vehicle he was riding in, he prayed the beads right back at that young man. God is Great. God is One. Praise be to God, the master of the Universe.

We might think that praying the beads is ritualistic, not very personal – mechanical, even. But that's not what Frank Wismer found. Instead, the prayer beads helped him to dedicate himself, trust in Christ, and like Simeon of long ago, wait for God to console his people.

The beads helped Wismer to trust in God's saving power.

They helped him to do what he could to maintain his relationship with God.

The beads helped him to choose wisely, to choose to act based on what he believed to be God's will, a will for peace and love.

May you today trust in God's saving power, deepen your relationship with God, and choose wisely so that you may walk in the way that leads to life.

Amen.

"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

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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. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the 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." Luke 2:21-35, NRSV.

"God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant." Genesis 17:9-14, NRSV.

"You shall keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year. "When the LORD has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you, you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your livestock that are males shall be the Lord's. But every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. Every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem. When in the future your child asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall answer, 'By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.' It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an

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emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt." Exodus 13:10-16, NRSV.

"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel, saying: If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days; as at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. On the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Her time of blood purification shall be thirty-three days; she shall not touch any holy thing, or come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purification are completed. If she bears a female child, she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her menstruation; her time of blood purification shall be sixty-six days. When the days of her purification are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb in its first year for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering. He shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement on her behalf; then she shall be clean from her flow of blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, male or female. If she cannot afford a sheep, she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and the other for a sin offering; and the priest shall make atonement on her behalf, and she shall be clean." Leviticus 12:1-8, NRSV.