

Introduction: Good morning, and welcome to Chapel. My name is Kerry Kuehn; I serve in the Physics Department here at Wisconsin Lutheran College.

The theme for this week, up until now, has been “The Savior of Heroes.” Today, however, we will deviate from this theme. It is the fortieth day after Christmas, so today we will celebrate two events which transpired on the same day. These two events are: First, the Presentation of our Lord, and second, the Purification of the Virgin Mary.

For our liturgy today, we will be using the order of Morning Devotion number one on page nineteen in your white service bulletin. After the invocation and prayer, we will sing together Psalm 148. Please rise.

God, our Father, each day is a gift of your grace.

Your mercies are new every morning.

Guide our steps by the light of your Word.

Shield us from harm and keep us from evil.

Better than life is your love.

Put joy in our hearts and praise on our lips. Alleluia!

Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty and everlasting God, you have brought us safely to this new day. Defend us with your mighty power, and grant that this day we neither fall into sin nor run into any kind of danger; and in all we do, direct us to what is right in your sight, through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord. **Amen**

You may be seated for Psalm 148:

Chapel talk: Looking back at the Psalm we just sung, you may notice that Psalm 148 is a meditation on the final four days of creation. As you know from the book of Genesis, the first three days of creation involve division.

First, God divides the light from darkness. And the evening and the morning were the first day. Second, God divides the waters from the sky. You might think of it as creating the horizon. Third, God divides the land from the water. On this third day, we see a transition from God's work of dividing into God's work of filling and ornamenting. So, on the third day, God begins to fill the land with vegetation, which will provide for the creatures that he will soon create.

Now, on the fourth day—and this is where our Psalm picks up—God ornaments the heavens with the sun, the moon, the shining stars, and all the heavenly hosts. On the fifth day, God fills the deep waters below with great sea creatures, and the skies above with winged creatures which swim, so to speak, through the stormy winds. From a scientific perspective, swimming and flying are almost the same. After all, what is swimming but flying through water? On the sixth day, then, God fills the mountains and hills of the earth with beasts and livestock, and, yes, people. Soon there are kings and princes, young men and maidens, old men and children.

Finally, on the seventh day, God ordains a day of rest, the sabbath, so that we might contemplate His work, and all the creatures of the earth might praise the name of the Lord. Perhaps most notably, there is symbolism here, which is echoed in the Psalm. In the creation account, God foreshadows the coming of the Messiah, the savior, whom he raised up as a horn for his people Israel, as the Psalmist says. Indeed, the new testament makes a clear connection between the work of Christ and the seventh day of creation. We are told that in Christ, we have a Sabbath rest—a rest that comes from the forgiveness of our sins.

So is the Genesis account historical? Or is it symbolic? Is it merely a matter of historical detail? Or does it have meaning? From Scripture, we know that it is both. The Genesis account tells us not only *how* God did things, but it reveals *why* God did things. It reveals His purpose, His intentions, and His Love.

This attention to both *history* and the *meaning* of history, as you know, is not unique to the creation account. Today is February second—forty days after Christmas—and we celebrate the Feast of the Presentation of our Lord—when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the temple, and also the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin Mary. These events are recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Before reading the text itself, let us spend a few minutes first, recalling the history surrounding these events. And second, discussing the meaning, the significance, of these events.

Why did Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the Temple? Recall the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. The last plague with which God struck the Egyptians before was the curse of the firstborn. Namely, every firstborn son in the land of Egypt was killed by the Angel of the Lord. Only the firstborn sons of the Israelites were spared, and then, only if the blood of a lamb was smeared on the doorposts. The firstborn sons of Israel were bought, so to speak, by the blood of a lamb.

This theme of buying back, or redeeming, a firstborn son is central to the story of the Exodus. In fact, it was codified in the Law of Moses, when the Lord said to Moses

“Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether man or animal.” (Ex. 13:1).

So, the ceremony of the Consecration, or the Presentation of the Firstborn was instituted. According to this ceremony, firstborn animals were brought to the priests to be killed as sacrifices. First born sons were brought to be given over for lives of service to Aaron and his sons, who themselves were the priests.

God, at this time, made a promise to Moses and the Israelites. He would be their God, bring them to a new land, and establish them into a nation forever. It is important, by the way, to note that God is making them a promise and not a contract. What is the difference?

A contract typically involves the exchange of property. The moment a contract is executed, property (or the rights to property) exchanges hands. I give you money; you give me a pair of sandals. Or I give you money, and you grant me the right to use your pontoon boat on Saturday. A promise, on the other hand, does not involve the exchange of property. For example, A marriage is a promise, not a contract. I do not own my wife. She does not own me. Rather, we promise to remain faithful to one another.

Notice that in a contract, there is no faith required, since the moment the contract is executed, the property rights are exchanged. In a promise, on the other hand, faith is essential. A husband and a wife live their lives based on faith in a promise that they made—last week, last year, or even decades ago.

As as we are reminded often in Scripture, the Israelites were were *not* very good at begin children of the Promise. They were not faithful. Recall the grumbling, the disobedience, and finally the affair with the Golden Calf. But God remained faithful to them. After their affair with the Golden calf, God made a special provision for the sons of Israel. He set aside the sons of Levi to be a substitute for

the first-born sons of Israel. In this way, the firstborn son in each family would not be required to assist the priests in carrying out all the ceremonial laws of the temple. Instead, the sons of Levi would do this duty. The sons of Israel were freed from their obligation! As God told Moses:

“I have taken the Levites in place of all the firstborn sons in Israel. Of all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the Tent of Meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them.” (Numbers Ch. 8:18).

The levites were a substitute, life for life. How, exactly, did this work out? Do you like numbers? At the time that the Levites were set aside for service, there were 220,273 firstborn sons of Israel. These were supposed to serve the priests. But there were only 220,000 sons of Levi to take their places. That is 273 too few Levites! What to do? All of the Levites were not an adequate substitute for the sons of Israel! The equation was not balanced!

Well, there was a work-around. The parents of the 273 firstborn sons, to avoid having to serve in the temple, were required to offer five silver coins at the Temple. This was the price to buy back , or redeem, their sons from having to serve the priests in the temple.

This careful calculus of redemption was continued in Israel. It was incorporated into the ceremony of the Presentation of the Firstborn. Here, a woman would come to the Temple after giving birth to her first son. She would offer two sacrifices. First, she would offer a lamb—or a pair of turtledoves if she was poor (as Mary and Joseph apparently were). This was a purification sacrifice on behalf of the child’s mother.

Second, she would offer five silver coins to redeem or “buy back” her firstborn son. This was a ceremonial payment to the Levites who were to take his place in the sacrificial work of the temple. The Ceremony of the Presentation of the Firstborn was a very powerful symbol. Moses writes that

“In days to come, when your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. This is why I sacrifice to the Lord the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.’ And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the Lord brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand.” (Exodus, Ch. 13:14)

This sign, which Moses mentions, points both backwards and forwards. It points backwards to the delivery from the slavery in Egypt. It points forward to the promised Messiah, Jesus, and the deliver from slavery to sin.

Today, we are reminded of God’s redemption of his people by the Christ Child. We are also reminded how, just as Mary was purified after childbirth in the Temple, so too, God’s people are purified by Christ—by His perfect keeping of the law, and finally, by His sacrificial death on the cross. He accomplished what the all the blood of bulls sacrificed by the Levites could not accomplish. Just as the Genesis account of history is pregnant with meaning, so too, Christ’s presentation at the Temple is pregnant with meaning. History, after all, is not merely a sequence of facts. Christ provides a key to unlocking the meaning of history. We read now from the Gospel of Luke:

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: “a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.

Please rise for prayer: Today in our prayers...

Almighty and ever-living God, as Your only-begotten Son was this day presented in the temple in the substance of our flesh, grant that we may be presented to You with pure and clean hearts; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

And we join in Luther's morning prayer. **I thank you, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, your dear Son, that you have kept me this night from all harm and danger. Keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please you. Into your hands I commend my body and soul and all things. Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me. Amen**

Blessing: May the love of the Lord Jesus draw us to himself. may the power of the Lord Jesus make us strong to do his will. May the peace of the Lord Jesus fill our lives. **Amen**