**Sermon Purification of Mary**

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**Text:** *and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord (Luke 2:22-32)*

A familiar nursery rhyme goes like this: “Mary had a little lamb, his fleece was white as snow.” Not unreasonably, some speculate that “Mary” in this song refers to the Ever-Virgin Mary; and the “lamb” whose “fleece was white as snow” is Jesus Himself, the Lamb of God, pure and holy. Be this as it may, the fact remains no one else could redeem us fallen humans from the just penalty for our sins. St. Peter writes to the Church: “you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Pet 1:19); and rather succinctly in chapter three of his Epistle, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death” (3:18) This day on the Festival of the Purification of Mary and Presentation of our Lord, we see Christ’s sacrificial ministry begin to unfold.

Forty days after his birth, Christ our Lord and His mother Mary observe the strictures of the Law of Moses which had been given by God on Mount Sinai. There are two observances in this event. Mary, for her part, observes the rite of purification. As it says in Leviticus chapter twelve: “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed.” “6 “And when the days of her purifying 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 a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering, 7 and he shall offer it before the Lord and make atonement for her. Then she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who bears a child, either male or female.” (Lev 14:1-4, 6-7)

On the part of Jesus, he, being the first male child of both Mary and Joseph, would need to be “redeemed” on pain of death. The Lord said to the Israelites, on the eve of their exodus from Egypt: ““When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord's. Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.” (Exod 13:11-13, 15) So by means of this ritual, every new generation of Israelites would be spared the pain of death by interposing the blood of a sacrifice, just as during the Exodus each household smeared blood over its doorposts for the Angel of Death to pass over them.

Looking at these observances of the Law, in Mary’s and our Lord’s case, there was no need for either of them to undergo these rites of redemption. All human beings – Jesus excepted – are conceived and born with original sin; and “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23), both temporal and eternal death. We cannot free ourselves from this sinful condition. The Old Testament Law stipulates that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” (Heb 9:22) In every instance, God required a substitutionary sacrifice to atone for the sins of His people. In Genesis chapter twenty-two, Abraham was justly ordered by God to sacrifice his firstborn son Isaac. Yet God, being rich in mercy, at the last moment intervened by offering a ram as a substitution – atoning for both Abraham’s and Isaac’s sin and securing the way for the true Redeemer to arrive from their line. Our Lord Jesus Himself needed no redemption, his being made like us “in every way” yet “without sin” (2:17, 4:15) He freely submitted to the sacrificial rite described in Luke.

Mary, as well, put herself under the purification rite without need. The Church has always taught that Jesus, when he was born, passed through the Virgin’s birth canal without penetration of the membrane. Her miraculous birth took place without labor pains and thus without the normal biological affairs that follow childbirth. Nonetheless, Mary submitted, again marking Jesus’ birth and delivery like that of any other Israelite born under the Law. Thirty years later our Lord received St. John’s “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:4) – much to John’s surprise, for He had no sins to repent of. Once again Jesus goes through the door marked “sinner” – substitutionally – as He ultimately would do as a falsely charged criminal on the cross at Calvary. There, in fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices, all the way from Abraham leading up to the turtledoves that shed their blood on His behalf (truly, not on his behalf but on behalf of the world), He declared: “It is finished.” The righteous for the unrighteous. So it is our Lord’s undeserved suffering and death results in our undeserved gift of eternal life for all who believe.

As St. Paul puts it in Galatians chapter four: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” (Gal 4:4-5) “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Cor 5:21) In celebration, we close with these words from Lutheran bishop Paul Speratus’ hymn “Salvation unto Us Has Come”: “Since Christ has full atonement made / And brought to us salvation, / Each Christian therefore may be glad / And build on this foundation. / Your grace alone, dear Lord, I plead, / Your death is now my life indeed, / For You have paid my ransom.”