

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

First Sunday after Christmas (2021)

Jesus is the New Temple

Rev. Toby Byrd

“And 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 male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”)” (Luke 2:22–23, ESV)

On Christmas Eve we heard the angel choir sing the Gloria in Excelsis, Glory to God in the Highest and this morning we heard the Nunc Dimittis as it takes center stage pointing to the liturgical activity of St. Luke’s gospel. On this glorious day of our Lord’s presentation in the temple, God once again enters His house, the house He had abandoned some 600 years before. But His presence is only momentary, for God no longer seeks a house of wood and stone in which to dwell, He now dwells in human flesh and bones, the flesh and bones of His incarnate Son, *Jesus Christ who is the New Temple*.

Throughout Scripture we see that God visited His people in many and various ways. For Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, He came to them through dreams and visions and personally. But when He rescued His people from Egypt, He chose other means by which to make His presence known. He led His people out of Egypt as a pillar of cloud by day and as a pillar of fire at night. When His people had completed construction of the tabernacle, His glory came to dwell over the ark of the covenant and the tabernacle while He guided His people, Israel. When Solomon completed construction of the first temple, God took up residence within it that He might hear the prayers and supplications of His people night and day. However, just prior to the Babylonians capturing the city of Jerusalem and destroying it and the temple, Ezekiel witnessed God depart from His house. We read in Ezekiel, ***“Then the glory of the LORD went out from the threshold of the house.” (Ezekiel 10:18, ESV)*** Even when the exiles returned from Babylon and built the second temple, God did not return to His house. So for nearly 600 years God was not to be found in His temple, not Solomon’s temple, nor the second temple, commonly known as Zerubbabel’s temple, nor Herod’s temple. But when God decided to return, He first chose as His new home the womb of a young virgin, the womb of Mary. The presence of the Lord overshadowed her, and she conceived, so that God now dwells within the child who is within her.

Now, forty days after His birth, on this great and glorious day, at the presentation of His only begotten Son, God returned to His temple as a forty-day old male child who is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and true man, born of the Virgin Mary. God’s promise that He would return to His temple (Mal. 3:1) has come to fruition. But He has chosen a new way to come to His people, coming to us as one of us, as a man born of woman. He has taken on our flesh that He may redeem it from sin and corruption. No longer do we focus our worship on the temple, but rather we focus on the Son of God, *Jesus Christ who is the New Temple*, in Him all righteousness and glory dwells.

The presentation of Jesus and the purification of Mary are according to the Law, to the Torah. Five times in the Gospel Reading for today we see reference to the Law. In verses 22, 23, and 24 St. Luke speaks of both ***“the Law of Moses”*** and ***“the Law of the Lord.”*** Then in verse 27 he

speaks of the “*custom of the Law,*” and finally in verse 39 he speaks again of the “*Law of the Lord.*”

The parents of the baby Jesus are keeping the Law. The Law required that when a woman completed her days of purification, she was to bring to the priest a year-old lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or a dove for a sin offering (Lev. 12:6). But since Mary and Joseph were of humble means they could offer an alternate sacrifice, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. Although they could not afford a lamb for a burnt offering, they brought with them the most perfect lamb, their son Jesus Christ. He who is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the final sacrifice for the sins of men. He is both God and man and both sacrifice and priest. What glorious, divine mysteries are unfolded on this day. Unfolded before the very eyes of the righteous and devout Simeon and the aged prophetess, Anna.

We read as they enter the Temple, they are startled as an amazing incident occurs. The first of many such occurrences to take place in the life of their Son.

Walking into the temple they are approached by a man they do not know. Although he is a total stranger, there is something familiar, something trustworthy in his face. This man, Simeon was a righteous and devout Israelite who was “*waiting for the consolation of Israel*” (Luke 2:25, *ESV*), the Messiah. The Holy Spirit had “*revealed to him . . . that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.*” (Luke 2:26 *ESV*). Led by the Holy Spirit, Simeon came to the temple and the moment he saw Mary and Joseph with the baby Jesus, he knew this child was the long-awaited Messiah. The one who came to save His people from sin, death, and the devil.

Approaching Mary, Simeon reaches out to take the child and Mary allows it. Then taking the baby Jesus in his arms, Simeon blesses God and says, “*Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.*” (Luke 2:29–32, *ESV*)

Simeon’s canticle is filled with Gospel overtones as he announces the presence of God’s salvation in His only begotten Son who is now present in the temple. His song is a beautiful response to God’s consolation and redemption brought to men through His Son, the Christ child. Simeon’s words are inspired by the Holy Spirit, they are thoroughly messianic, and they are an affirmation of God’s promise to him, that he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah. Thus, Simeon is now set free to depart in peace according to the Word of the Lord. His eyes have been opened to God’s saving action cloaked in the flesh of the forty-day old Jesus.

Throughout His ministry, people came to know what Simeon was privileged to see, that here in the flesh of Jesus Christ also dwelt God. His teaching, His healings, His miracles of controlling the weather, His feeding of the five thousand with two little fish and five barley loaves of bread, and His raising the dead all testified to His divinity. His disciples testified that He was the Christ, the Son of the Living God (Matt. 16:16) and that He alone had the words of eternal life (John 6:68). But on the night, He was betrayed, all but one abandoned Him. At His crucifixion there was only one apostle. It was not until His resurrection from the grave that they all came to know who He truly is, the Incarnate Son of God, both God and man simultaneously, who came to accomplish the salvation of man from sin, death, and the devil, and this He did. Simeon was blessed to see God’s salvation before His death and so, too, were the disciples of Christ, the first being the disciples at Emmaus.

From that day many have come to see and know what Simeon saw and believed, God in His temple, the temple of His Son, Jesus Christ. Many have come to know of the consolation that awaits all who die in faith, life eternal with Jesus Christ, His angels, archangels, and all the heavenly hosts. Simeon takes the baby Jesus into his arms and blesses God for allowing him to depart in peace, to depart with the assurance of his salvation because his, ***“eyes have seen [God’s] salvation” (Luke 2:30, ESV)*** That salvation which comes in the life, death, and resurrection of His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. That salvation promised to all who believe in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the Altar of the Cross.

Yes, on the fortieth day after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph went to the temple with their son to fulfill the Law, but this was only one act of fulfilling the Law. Indeed, there were many acts of fulfilling the Law. Many sacrifices had to be made to satisfy the Law, and to make those sacrifices one had to go to the temple where the priests would offer sacrifices for the forgiveness of sins. But the writer to the Hebrews declares, ***“in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” (Hebrews 10:3–4, ESV)*** The sacrifices of the Law were simply a reminder of sin, this is the purpose of the Law, to show us our sin. But in the temple, which is Christ Jesus, in whom God dwells, the temple becomes the sacrifice. Forgiveness is accomplished and secured by the one final sacrifice for all sins, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He is priest and sacrifice who willingly walked to the Altar of the Cross to offer Himself as the Lamb without blemish as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

Jesus Christ was brought to the temple for His presentation. In that action, God returned to His temple because He dwelt within the child Jesus. As He was brought in, He was presented to Simeon. In like manner He is presented to us. He comes to us through the proclamation of the Gospel, He comes to us through the blessed waters of Baptism, and He comes to us, giving us His body and blood to eat and drink that we might clutch Him to ourselves as did Simeon, proclaiming what Simeon proclaimed, the Nunc Dimittis.

Oh that the world could see what Simeon saw. That everyone could know and believe in the consolation of God poured out upon all men through His Son, Jesus Christ. For ***“There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 ESV)***. Even though death calls, we will not fear because the Lord is with us. He calls us by His Gospel. He leads us to His new temple, not one built by the hands of men, but one of His own making: the temple of His only begotten Son Jesus Christ. He does not lead us there to offer sacrifices but to receive the blessings of His Son’s final sacrifice for the sins of mankind, the forgiveness of our sins and life eternal.

God is in His temple, He is in the man Jesus Christ, He is the God/Man Jesus Christ. He is in the temple of His Son, Jesus Christ and He is in the midst of you, for Christ is with you because you have been called to faith and the Spirit of God dwells in you. St. Paul tells us, ***“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” (Romans 8:11, ESV)*** Jesus is the New Temple, the focus of our faith and worship. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the Peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.