

Sermon Christmas 1 2020

December 27, 2020

Luke 2:22-40

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the presentation of Jesus in the temple and do so in view of God's presence. Amen.

As I talked last week about holiness, I said it's something that we need to be reminded of because it's not a category we really think in. As I did that, I made the point that holiness is something that is set apart and distinct because it carries a connection to God and His divinity. I think as we don't think in that way, we have a real trouble understanding things like what we heard in the Gospel lesson today. By that I don't mean the song of Simeon. We get that Simeon is rejoicing at the birth of our Savior. We get that he realizes He is looking upon the salvation of mankind in his arms. However, the whole idea of the presentation and the purification doesn't make sense. I'll explain the actual command in a bit, but to start, I want to reconnect to the point I made last week about God's presence, that holiness and presence go hand in hand.

If you recall, I made that point last week that you can't come into God's presence if you're unholy. Nothing unholy can come into His presence, or it will desecrate the presence, and His presence will be detrimental and death-dealing. How so? Because He communicates holiness via that presence. When you come before God His holiness radiates from His being. In fact, all holiness is derived only from Him and is only available by contact with Him. This is a strong OT theme that we have become accustomed overlooking or misunderstanding. You know, we sort of think of the Old Testament as just all these crazy laws and we say Jesus came to overcome them so that we're saved. And that's that. But it's like I said last week. We are made holy by Him, keeping His commands prevents desecration. But this begs for us to ask the question, how can we come into that presence? Sin makes us unholy; if we're unholy we can't come into presence. But holiness only comes from contact with presence, so how do we get it?

And as we're speaking about presence, this is where we think God just comes to us like a laser beam. This is where we don't think in view of the OT. This is where we have turned God into this lovey-dovey mushy God who is all around us and who we can just know that He loves us because we feel so good about Him. But that's where I love the statement from the Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe, by C.S. Lewis. I think most of you know that and have at least seen the movie. I don't recall if they actually say the line in the movie, but it happens between Mr. Beaver and Lucy, one of the human girls in the

story. They're discussing Aslan, the Lion who is a Christ figure, and Lucy, upon hearing that he is a lion makes the connection of what that means. So, she asks Mr. Beaver if Aslan is safe. Fair question, right? I was looking at the lions when we went to the zoo at the beginning of the month. I was thinking of how they are majestic creatures, but how I love animals and I'd like to pet them and the like. But I knew that was a stupid thought, right? You can't just go up and snuggle a lion. Why not? They could easily overpower you, tear your body to shreds, and devour your remains. So, to answer the question is a lion safe? No! And that's what Mr. Beaver says about Aslan: "Is he safe? No! But he's good."

Christians, that's the presence of our God. Is it safe? Is our God safe? No! But He's good. And in His goodness, He's given us the means to come before Him. He has given us atonement for sin. Like I said last week, that's what the Old Testament structure taught us. We can come into His presence because He provides means for sin to be paid for. The sacrifices, the shedding of blood made clear that payment. Of course, those were pointing to Jesus, but we'll get to that in a minute too. So, there's atonement.

But there's another part that allows us to enter into His presence. That's the authorization He speaks in His Word. Think about going to visit a king, or the president, or some other VIP. You wouldn't just bust into their court, or the oval office, or their office period without permission. You wouldn't just walk past everyone and speak to the person on your own whim, right? What do you wait for? You wait for some kind of invitation to come into that presence, and then you wait for some kind of invitation to speak what's on your mind.

And that's what the Word provides. In the Old Testament, the word provided that authorization according to the commands of the Law. Think about what I said before about this presence of God being like a laser beam, and we sort of think about God just zapping us with presence in a way that's unmediated, that's with out mediation. But that's not what we see. No, there's the mediation of what the Word says, what it authorizes. This helps things make more sense in the Old Testament too. For example, if you know the story of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu who were serving at the altar at the tabernacle and were struck dead because they didn't bring fire to the offering of incense that was authorized. Or the story of Uzzah, who tried to prevent the Ark of the Covenant from falling, but also was killed when he touched it. These things don't make sense unless we understand the danger of approaching the holy presence of God apart from the authorization of His Word.

And that word is what we see Mary and Joseph abiding in when they bring Jesus to the Temple in the Gospel of Luke. As Luke tells us, **“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’).”** You see the Law prescribed that there was a period of uncleanness then a need for purification after that at birth. It actually had associations with purity relating to birth, to death, to sex, to things like menstruation. And we hear some of that and think, “Why?” What does that have to do with sinning, why is one impure then? From what I’ve read, it was actually because some of the countries around Israel believed that there was power to be gained from these things. Women had special power in view of their ability to give birth. The blood of menstruation had special power attached to it. Death had its own power, as one was thought to be able to manipulate the spirits of their dead loved ones to accomplish the things they desired. And as you hear all of that, where is power not attributed? To the Lord. So, Israel was called to be different. They were called to disassociate those things from their worship. They were to understand that the Lord gave them their provision and power. Therefore, they were to be cleansed from these things before going to His presence. And where was that presence? In the Temple. Specifically, at the Ark.

Now, I said before that I would connect this to Jesus, and here we have to. What’s neat about this presentation of Jesus is that it’s a shift. On the one hand, this baby is being brought to the Temple, He’s being presented for service to the Lord. But on the other hand, look at the response of Simeon and Anna. What are they there to tell everyone? What was promised Simeon? That he would see the consolation of Israel, the Lord’s Christ, before his death. And this promise was fulfilled. The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon, revealed to Anna too, that this was in fact that Christ. And so, they gave testimony to that witness of the Spirit. And if you know the Law, you know it was important that they both did it. Why? Because every matter had to be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses. You have the witness of Simeon, you have the witness of Anna, and you could say you’ve also got the witness of Joseph and Mary who can confirm their words.

But as we’re talking about presence of God, think about who this Jesus is. What was He named? Well, yes, Jesus, but Immanuel. Immanuel. God with us. God had been present in the Ark of the Covenant. His holiness had been brought out of the Holy of Holies in the Temple and carried to the people via the work of the priests. But there in the arms of Simeon is the new priest, the Infant Priest, holy born. And now the glory of God, the presence of God was entering the Temple in a way that had never happened.

There in this child born at Christmas was the presence of God in an utterly unprecedented fashion. God meeting with His people.

Now in the temple, God met with His people to give them His holiness, to bless them with His promises and His life, but now in Jesus this was no longer happening through those men, through the sacrifices on the altar. In Christ, there was a new Ark, and the new altar would be the cross, and the altar in the Heavenly Realms where the sacrifice of the cross would be brought before the Heavenly Father in satisfaction for every sin, every unholy thought word and deed. There in that work at the ascension, the Lord who was presented that day in the Temple presented and continues to present His work before the Father for us.

But as I speak about the ascension, what do we do with God's presence now? I keep mentioning how we get this omnipresence wrong and how we think God just connects to us like a laser beam, but that's not right, so what about it? If this is how God works, where is that presence? It's that question I'm constantly asking. Where is God? Not as He is everywhere, but where is He for you?

Hopefully, by now you're thinking of it rightly. He is in His Word. He is in that message of the Gospel that tells you of this priest who sacrificed Himself on the cross for you that in His resurrection you would have holiness to enter into His presence. He is in the waters of baptism. Those waters that wash not earthly impurity and uncleanness from your flesh but cleanse your conscience in the washing in His purity. He is under that bread and wine, His body and blood present for your life and salvation in the forgiveness they won for you on the cross. That is where He is.

And just like there was a liturgy, a rite of how to approach God in the Old Testament, we have a rite centered on His Word to come before Him as He brings Himself to us in preaching, in the Lord's Supper. Think about the awe of that presence, Christians. As I often say, think about the awe of the Christ here in your presence. Think of the awe that we too can approach Simeon's song with as we sing it after communion: Lord let your servants depart in peace, according to what? According to your Word! And why? Because our eyes have seen the salvation He has prepared for us! Salvation of holiness. Salvation of mercy. Salvation of love! Salvation by the Christ who was presented in the Temple that He could present us before the Father holy and blameless. And why? That we may stand in His presence there. Not because we deserve or have earned it, but because He has loved us and authorized us to enter by the grace He won for us through His Son this infant in Simeon's arms. Amen.