

2 February 2003
The Presentation of our Lord

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“A Day of Great Moment”

Text: Luke 2:22-40

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Days of great moment often start out in the most usual and regular of ways. Yet when they are over, things will never be the same again. September 11, 2001 was one such day that changed our *world*. January 22, 1973 was a day of great moment for our *nation*, with the Supreme Court ruling on *Roe vs. Wade*. And there have been days in each of *your lives* that, when they were over, things would never be the same again. For some, even yesterday was such a day. (The Space Shuttle Columbia Tragedy.) How quickly, how unexpectedly, things in our lives can change.

Well the Holy Gospel you heard this evening spoke of one such day, a day of great moment. It took place 40 days after the birth of Jesus, when Mary, Joseph, and Jesus arrived at the Temple in Jerusalem. It was the day set for Mary's purification after childbirth and for Jesus' presentation, according to the Scriptures. And it started out in the most usual and regular of ways. It all looked pretty normal, with business and life as usual: just another family, just another sacrifice, just another presentation. . . . But after this day, things would never be the same again.

Things would never be the same again for **Simeon**, who had finally received what he had been promised, and as a result, he was now ready to die. He had seen the Lord's Christ as He held the baby Jesus in his arms. And now, as he says, he is ready to die. He is ready to “*depart in peace.*” Surely a day of great moment for him.

Things would never be the same again for **Anna**, that old widow who had been living in the Temple for so long, “*worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day.*” After so many years, she is given the privilege of seeing her Saviour and as a result, she cannot stop speaking of Him to all who were there. A day of great moment for her.

And things would never be same for **Mary and Joseph**, for how could they be, after seeing all of this take place, and after hearing those words of Simeon. They knew who their son, Jesus, was . . . but still to hear these words! That Jesus was “*appointed for the*

fall and rising of many in Israel.” That he is not going to be well-liked and popular, but in fact, opposed by many. That because of him, a sword would pierce Mary’s soul also. If it didn’t before, it had to hit them now: this was not going to be easy. A day of great moment for them.

Simeon, Anna, Mary and Joseph – those are the folks we usually focus on when we hear this text. Folks whose lives were changed on this day. . . . But there is one more person for whom this day was a day of great moment. One more person whose life was changed and for whom things would never be the same again – and that person is you. Now that sounds funny because, after all, we weren’t there; we weren’t even alive! But this day was a day of great moment for us, because of what Jesus did for us that day as our substitute, and for what this Scripture tells us about Jesus’ fulfilling of the Old Testament, and for what it teaches us about what Jesus is still doing for us today.

And so to help us understand this, **first** notice where all of this takes place. It is in the Temple. For, after all, where is God? If you are going to present your first-born son to Him, in accordance with the Law, then you go to the Temple. And that sounds pretty ordinary, except for this fact: God had never come to this Temple *visibly*. He had to the others, but not to this one. When the Tabernacle was built by Moses in the wilderness at God’s command, God came to that Tabernacle visibly in the cloud of glory that filled the place, and God was there present for His people. Then when King Solomon built the first Temple in Jerusalem, God came to that Temple visibly in the same cloud of glory that filled the place, and God was there present for His people. . . . But Solomon’s Temple is not the Temple in the Holy Gospel for today. Solomon’s Temple was destroyed and a second Temple was built by the exiles returning to Jerusalem, but God’s cloud of glory did not fill that place. Because God had something else in mind. God was going to build the next Temple *Himself*, and His presence was not going to be in a cloud, but in flesh and blood. And so with Jesus’ presentation at this Temple, God had finally come visibly and was there present for His people – in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

Now that’s more than just an interesting bit of theological trivia! It means that God’s available presence is no longer limited to a building in Jerusalem, but is wherever His new Temple is – wherever the flesh and blood of Jesus is. And so while Mohammedans are required to make a pilgrimage to Mecca to be at their holy place, and Jews so desperately want the Temple in Jerusalem to be rebuilt to again have their holy place, we have no such problem! For our Holy Place, where we go to find the gracious and available presence of God, where we go in times of trouble or *days of great moment* – is not to a building or a place, but to the flesh and blood of our Saviour. For He has come to us, in His abundant means. And so to go to the Word is to go to the Temple. To go to the Font is to go to the Temple. To come to this Table is to go to the Temple. For here is

God present for you in flesh and blood, in grace and forgiveness, in comfort and in hope.

The **second** thing that happens on this day is the purification of Mary. According to the Old Testament ceremonial Law, a woman had to be cleansed after childbirth and that cleansing would take place with an offering. And the offering specified was this: a lamb one year old and either a young pigeon or turtledove. Or, if the people were too poor to afford the lamb, then they could offer two pigeons or two turtledoves. And since Mary and Joseph, the parents of our Lord, seemed to be of very modest means, we heard that it was this latter offering of two birds that they offered for the sacrifice. . . . Now, there are two very significant and unusual things about that. First, this purification of women after childbirth was not required because childbirth somehow made them sinful or unclean – it was a reminder of original sin, inherited by children through birth, and which so deeply affects our nature that we are completely and totally sinful from the moment of our conception. And so the parents that passed on this sin sought atonement for it with this offering and sacrifice.

But the question is: why did this concern Mary? This was not the case with Jesus! He did not inherit original sin because He was not conceived in the usual way, but was, as we confess in the Creed, “*conceived by the Holy Spirit, [and] born of the Virgin Mary,*” and therefore completely sinless. So why was this purification necessary? . . . Well, the answer is that it was not necessary for Jesus, but it was **for us**. Because we are the ones born in original sin. **We** are the ones who need purification, and without that purification would be condemned. And so once again we see Jesus here as our substitute. Taking our place under the Law to rescue us from our sins. To cleanse and purify us, just as He was circumcised **for us**, and baptized **for us**, and crucified **for us**. . . . And do not underestimate the significance of that little phrase **for us**. For in times of trouble or *days of great moment*, people often wonder where God is. But we know. He is not just our Sovereign, but our substitute, and therefore He is with us, just as He has always been with us. *For the times when He seems the farthest away from us is actually when He is the closest to us.* That’s terribly important – and the theology of the cross – so let me repeat it: *the times when God seems the farthest away from us is actually when He is the closest to us.* Not punishing us, but purifying us. Not detached and watching, but active and saving. And near – as near as the water of your baptism, as near as His blood poured out for you, as near as His Word of forgiveness and promise. All of these testify that your Saviour is here, **for you**. To hear, to touch, to taste . . . to save.

But I said there were two significant and unusual things about this purification – the second is the fact that the lamb was not offered for the sacrifice. Strictly speaking, we could say that was simply because Mary and Joseph were poor and could not afford it. But could this not be the work of the Holy Spirit, who wants us to see the Lamb who will

be sacrificed not just for *some* sins, but for the sin of the world? Jesus, the Lamb of God, is here being presented at the Temple, but the time for His sacrifice had not yet come. And so the lamb is not yet sacrificed. He is presented as the first born son of Mary, but only because as the only-begotten Son of God, He was first given to us. And when the time would fully come, when all was accomplished, He *would* be sacrificed, on the altar of the cross, to redeem you and me. To pay the price for us. To purchase us for His Father, for Heaven, for eternity, *“not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death.”*

And knowing that gives us enormous confidence and hope. Knowing that our Saviour has taken care of our sinful **past** and has provided us a sure and certain **future** gives us the confidence and ability to live in the **present**. Without fear of times of trouble, which surely await us. Without fear of days of great moment, of which many are still sure to come. Without fear that this day may be my last, and therefore I better make sure I have everything in order. No, everything is in order, but not because of us, but because of Christ, because of our substitute, because of His death and resurrection.

And this is what we sang of in the last verse of the Office Hymn – some very significant words:

**Jesus, by your presentation, When they blessed you, weak and poor,
Make us see your great salvation, Seal us with your promise sure;
And present us in your glory To your Father cleansed and pure.**

Or in other words, Jesus' presentation was a day of great moment which points us to the one last and final day of great moment, when we stand weak and poor before the Father. But have no fear, for on that day it will be Jesus doing the presenting, as He presents us to His Father, cleansed and pure, and with all the rights and privileges and inheritance of first born sons. And that day of great moment will be a day that never ends – the eternal day of Heaven, when our weak and poor bodies will be changed into glorified bodies. That is the promise that you have been sealed with, and therefore it is a day that you can look forward to.

And how important that is because, as I said at the beginning of this sermon, days of great moment always come unexpectedly. Yesterday, nobody woke up thinking that anything out of the ordinary was going to happen. September 11th was one of the bluest and brightest days you will *ever* see in New York City. And the day of the Lord's return is going to start out like any other day. But by the end of that day, things will never be the same again! But in Jesus – your Lamb, your Temple, your Substitute – you are ready for that day of great moment. For that day of your presentation!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen