

Lesson 8

First Sunday after Christmas

The Holy Gospel: Luke 2:22–40

Joseph and Mary walked the six miles from Bethlehem to Jerusalem for a purpose. The Law of Moses declared a woman to be ceremonially unclean following childbirth. The birth of a son called for seven days of seclusion as “contagiously” unclean, followed by another 33 days of religious impurity, during all of which she was not to come into contact with hallowed things, nor enter the sanctuary. In the case of the birth of a daughter, the numbers were doubled (see Leviticus 12). Joseph and Mary had come to the temple to offer the prescribed sacrifice for her purification: “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

They also had brought Jesus, now 40 days old, “to present Him to the Lord.” This ritual requirement, the redemption of the firstborn son, memorialized God’s sparing the firstborn of the Israelite families in Egypt the night the angel of the Lord slew the firstborn of all the Egyptians (see Exodus 13:11–16). The concept was that from that time on, every firstborn belonged to the Lord. The firstborn animals were to be sacrificed to Him; the firstborn sons were to serve Him throughout their lives. In actual practice, the Levites served in the place of the firstborn (see Numbers 3:5–13). The firstborn sons were “redeemed” (bought back from the Lord) to live with their parents by the offering of the appointed sacrifice. This ritual presentation of Jesus to the Lord and His redemption through the offering of a sacrifice were carried out by Joseph and Mary after she had gone through her rite of purification.

103. What is especially striking about *these* two parents acknowledging that their firstborn son belonged to God?

Simeon is introduced simply as “a man in Jerusalem.” He was not particularly prominent in Jerusalem’s religious circles, but had great spiritual qualifications: he “was ____ and ____, waiting for ____, and the ____ was upon him.”

104. What does it mean that Simeon was “waiting for the consolation of Israel”? What promise had the Holy Spirit made to Simeon? How did Simeon recognize the baby Jesus as the Lord’s Christ?

Simeon’s song of praise is called the *Nunc Dimittis* from its first words in Latin. In the fifth century, it became part of the Church’s worship life, fittingly used as a liturgical song that celebrates our having seen the Lord’s Christ in Holy Communion.

105. What did Simeon say that made Joseph and Mary marvel?

106. To Mary, Simeon spoke of the destiny that awaited her son, a destiny that would have a direct effect on her. What does it mean that Jesus was “appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel”? (See 1 Peter 2:6–8.) How would Jesus be “a sign that is opposed . . . , so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed”? (See John 10:22–33.) When did a sword pierce through Mary’s soul?

Anna is introduced, not just as a woman but as “a prophetess.” Since she was a fixture in the temple, Anna’s testimony about Jesus must have carried some weight with those who heard her.

107. What do you think Anna said as she “began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem”?

Luke does not mention the flight to Egypt and the family’s living there for a time. Having provided significant information about Jesus’ birth and infancy, Luke wrote in a summary way about His childhood development in His family in Nazareth.

108. Could we say about our own children in our Christian homes, “[They] grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon [them]”?

The Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 61:10–62:3

Chapters 56–66 deal with the restoration following the exile in Babylon, and contain Isaiah’s prophetic and poetic vision of what will be for Judah in God’s plan, colored by anticipation of the messianic kingdom. In this passage from chapters 61 and 62, two word pictures portray the joyous attitude of the prophet and of all who respond in faith to the glad tidings of salvation. The first is that of a wedding—the groom adorned with a festive wedding headdress, and the bride with her jewels. The second is that of a garden causing seeds to grow.

109. What “clothes” have been received from the Lord that so delight the prophet?

110. What is the produce that this “garden” will yield? Who will see this garden and benefit from it? How is that significant to us?

In the opening verses of chapter 62, Isaiah exults over the coming fulfillment of his prophecies in the salvation of God’s people.

111. What are the qualities of His saved people that will be displayed before the nations?

112. What is the significance of their being given a new name by the Lord? (See vv. 4–5; Jeremiah 33:16; Revelation 2:17; 3:11–12.)

113. Zion, Yahweh’s saved people, will become the Lord’s crown of beauty. Why is the crown of beauty held in His hand and not worn on His head?

114. How does this lesson tie in with the emphasis of today’s Holy Gospel?

The Epistle for the Day: Galatians 4:4–7

“When the fullness of time had come” refers to the right *chronos*, the right point in history when God determined it was appropriate for His “children” to become “adult sons and daughters” (see vv. 1–3). God sent His Son, His “only-begotten Son.” He was not created by God but was eternally begotten by the Father. The Greek for *sent* has the weight of “sent out from God on a mission.” The same word described Jesus’ commissioning some of His disciples to be apostles.

We might ask: “Why *that* particular point in history?” No one can answer definitively; the answer is to be found only in the determinative will of God. However, we can make the following observations about that time period: 1) for several hundred years the known world had been influenced by Greek culture and language; 2) due to their dispersion, the faith and writings of the Jews had been spread across numerous nations and cultures and had attracted adherents to the faith; and 3) Roman rule had brought with it an enforced public peace, an international roadway system, and a reliable postal system that enhanced communication.

115. Pagan religions had stories of theophanies—the gods coming into the human scene for a time. How do Paul’s words describe something radically more than a theophany? What is established by the phrase “born of woman”? What does it mean that God’s Son was “born under the law”?

Paul said God’s Son came to *redeem* those under bondage to the law. The Greek describes “paying the price to set a slave free.”

116. From what aspects of bondage to the Law has Christ freed us? (See Galatians 3:13; 5:4–6.)

117. How did God's Son's placing Himself under the Law as Jesus Christ buy us freedom from the Law? (See Romans 5:18–19.) Does Christ's redeeming us from the Law mean that we are now free to disregard the great principles of God's Law? (See Romans 6:15–18.)

118. What are our rights as those who have received adoption as God's "sons [and daughters]"?

"Because you *are* sons [and daughters]" emphasizes the accomplished redemption that is ours through faith in Christ's once-for-all atonement. "God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts" emphasizes the new relationship we enjoy with God as a result of our having been brought to faith in Christ.

119. What does our being able to say "Abba! Father!" mean to us?

120. What is the lasting benefit of our being elevated from slavery to full sonship and daughterhood?