

**SERMON- Presentation of our Lord**  
**Charles R. Cowherd**

Malachi 3:1-4

Psalms 24:7-10

**St. Timothy's (Herndon)**  
**February 2, 2025**

Hebrews 2:14-18

**Luke 2:22-40**

From the Gospel of Luke: *When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth.*<sup>1</sup>

**OPENER:**

Here's a list that I composed of all the things that a new parent has to do, in the 40 or so days *following* the birth of a child:

- 1) Negotiate new sleep patterns
- 2) Struggle with nursing demands
- 3) Figure out the Car seat
- 4) Make follow up appointments with the doctor for both mother and child
- 5) Worry about the birth certificate and the Name
- 6) Worry about the social security number
- 7) Worry about circumcision (!)
- 8) Figure out the stroller
- 9) Arrange for visits from parents and family and friend
- 10) Finally, make a fun and vibrant Facebook message announcing the birth.

This all on top of regular work requirements and anything else that pops up. And I have not even mentioned "coming back to church" and Baptism.

In our Gospel reading, into that whirlpool of activity, into that holy and draining moment of 1<sup>st</sup> time parenthood, Joseph tells Mary: "pack everything up, we are going to.... Jerusalem" for..... a ritual, a ceremony, which sounds awful lot like a "want to" not a "need to" or a "have to"

You can imagine there being a disagreement, "Do we gotta'?"

Do we really need to travel all that way?

A million excuses could have been given:

Might it not be a dangerous given what we know about Herod?<sup>2</sup>

We don't have enough money to pay for this thing.

You know, there is some drama with his paternity.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2.40

<sup>2</sup> Allowing for wandering over to Matthew.

Look, we can't even afford a lamb, we are going to embarrass ourselves with a pigeon.

OR "This is outdated, sexist, patriarchal. Who needs to be 'purified' and why?"

## LAW

Maybe that happened but we don't hear any of that, Instead, Mary and Joseph responded to all those challenges with obedience to the Law, with a desire to follow the tradition, and with a religiosity that belies their circumstances.

Just as they had with the naming and circumcision of Jesus, Mary and Joseph perform their required ritual obligations, this time with the purification, the Presentation and the sacrifice.

I won't pretend to understand exactly what is going on in the story, and I am not sure that Luke really does either, but he seems keen on stressing Mary and Joseph's relationship to the Law—capital "L"—mentioned 4 times in our passage<sup>3</sup>

As a reminder, this Law, capital "L", was a series of religious and social rules all intertwined in daily life in a way we would find unfamiliar/ burdensome/ shackling.

It seems, however, that Joseph and Mary saw the Law, as observant Jews did at that time, as God's great gift.

They understood that the Law was like a beautiful garden with clear boundaries, that we are then allowed to till.

The Law, capital "L", provides the rules to the game, and it's much more fun to play the game, when you know the rules, and everyone follows them.

I preach on this topic a lot, on this subject of how the Law and the Gospel intersect. I don't know what to say, other than it comes up a lot in our lectionary.

## LAW

Do you remember that Graduation speech, came out a decade or so ago, entitled "If you want to change the world, make your bed"?<sup>4</sup>

It was given by Naval Admiral William H. McRaven, commander of U.S. Special

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<sup>3</sup> Mentioned 4 times in our passage, Luke 2.23,24,27,39.

<sup>4</sup> <https://news.utexas.edu/2014/05/16/mcraven-urges-graduates-to-find-courage-to-change-the-world/>

Operations Command, to the University of Texas.

It went viral, it has 19 million views, turned it into a best-selling book.

In the speech, Admiral McRaven, who served for decades as a Navy SEAL, famously told the audience of soon-to-be college graduates:

“If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.”

He went on to have 9 other points that began with “if you want to change the world” followed by “you need to do x, y, z.”

It's a great speech. The crowd loved it. Dads loved it. Mom loved it,

I bring it up because he, and the military, know and preach that ritual, training, going through the motions, virtuous behavior, these things yield results.

Those in the religious sphere, we understand this as well, we call it the Law, capital “L.” Like the speech, our version also has 10 rules, called the 10 Commandments, if you follow them, it will be good.

Now, the Law capital “L” is good, the Military is good, making your bed is Great.

But, to be clear, these rules, rituals, those are not the Good News.

That's *not* the Gospel of God in Jesus Christ:

The Gospel is: “Christ is Died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again.”

That's what I am called to preach.

The Law, in its many expression, is still good life advice, it's *wisdom* even.

With the military, and for those who face danger in their lives, there's a particular application. The thinking is: we do these little things: shine our shoes and make our beds, and *then* we can do the hard things. So when you are being shot at, you trust each other, and you are trained to know what to do.

## **HOLY FAMILY**

I want to suggest that the Holy Family is facing something like that type of situation in our Gospel story: a response to Trauma, a PTSD moment if you will.

Mary and Joseph are, as the expression goes, “under fire” as they struggle to raise the Christ Child. Already, they have survived questions about Jesus' parentage, the long travel to Bethlehem from Nazareth, the unforgiving lodgings there, the strange visitors that greeted their birth, and the threat of great physical danger.

The baby was born, healthy and happy, and to great fanfare.  
THEN the real work begins.

Let's stay there with young parents, and the Law and ritual.

It is HARD to bring young children to church. Really HARD.

I always tell parents of children: "It was hard to come to church as a parent, and I worked for one.."

I tell parents of newborns: "Take time off from church, this is the one time that you actually have a valid excuse. I am not sure what others' excuses are. But this is good one. It's hard, we will be here when you are ready."

Strangely, young parents often actually like church, because church is sometimes, not always, a baby friendly place you can go to, where your child will receive love and attention, and you might get to have an adult conversation.

Here's the rub: I wish that I could guarantee that if you show up to church as a young family with your new-born baby, that your problems will be solved, and that things will work out. I wish that the line were straighter, that if you do the little things right, that if you make your bed that it indeed always sorts the big stuff out. It certainly does not always.

I cannot do that.

I *can* say that a life of faith looks somewhat like our story today, lots of rituals and observance of the Law, punctured and punctuated by fire and light and thunder and lightning, and silence.

I can almost guarantee, though, at least at St. Timothy's, that a person of an advanced age might say something kind to you, maybe not as prophetic of Simeon and Anna, but you will get some wisdom.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In our Gospel, Luke is keen on emphasizes how God and humanity, the Spirit and obedience to the law, act in concert.

In our story, Mary and Joseph perform their obligations to the Law as the Holy Spirit acts as "mission director" guiding people to their places and roles at the right time.

Thus, one commentator writes that “Salvation history appears not simply out of a void, but from daily living true to the Law; it is also, however not set into motion by human obedience. It is the frame, or the foundation, but movement result only through God’s spirit.”<sup>5</sup> That’s tough that we don’t control all of it. That the 10 anything WON’T make it so.

St. Paul said that “By bearing each other’s burdens, you will fulfill the Law of Christ.”<sup>6</sup> By loving one another, Jesus emphasized, you complete the Law.

So it was annoying, from where I am sitting, for Mary and Joseph to have to go to Jerusalem at this moment for what was required to take place there.

But Mary and Joseph are doing these rites, crossing the I’s and dotting the t’s, out of a sense of joy, not out of a sense of obligation, but out of joy....

The result then, is also joy, for us as we present ourselves to God in faith and trust and love, shining as a light in the world, and in accordance to the Law. .

**AMEN**

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<sup>5</sup> Bovon, François. 2002. *A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke (Volume 1: 1:1-9:50.)* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 96.

<sup>6</sup> Galatians 6.2