

# The Presentation of the Lord

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2 February, 2020

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading** Malachi 3:1–4

**Responsorial Psalm** Psalm 24:7,8,9,10

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading** Hebrews 2:14–18

**Gospel** Luke 2:22–40

Jerusalem, the Holy City. This was not the first time that either Mary or Joseph had visited the city. Despite being from poor rural families, they were both observant Jews and regularly made the pilgrimage up to Jerusalem for the major feast days. On those trips, however, they would have come as members of a large caravan from Nazareth with extended family and friends to provide company, safety, and support. This time, they were alone, having departed from Bethlehem instead of Nazareth.

Bethlehem may have been Joseph's ancestral home, but it was not a familiar place for either of them. They had been forced to travel there some two months earlier by that accursed Roman census. Even though there was no immediate family in Bethlehem whose hospitality they could have relied on, and the census had filled the inn where travelers could normally pay for shelter, it hadn't been so bad at first. They had been living in a stable with the animals, but Joseph's boys, Jacob, James, Simon, and Jude, had come with them to be registered in Bethlehem too. Jacob and James had even brought their wives, so even if they had had to live in a stable, they had been surrounded by loved ones. Lately, however, things had gotten much harder. Jacob and James had returned to Nazareth with their wives, to tend to their crops and homes. Simon had elected to go with them, so only Jude remained with Joseph and Mary as they waited for Mary to be recovered enough from her pregnancy to travel.

Further, with no one to vouch for him, Joseph had been forced to make do with whatever day labor he could find to support his family. Such wages, a single silver denarius each day he found work, did not go far. Jude did what he could to help out, and even now was working in the fields around Bethlehem to earn a few more coins. Even so, money was tight so far from home.

And now it was 40 days since Jesus's birth. Time to go up to the temple and offer the sacrifice for Mary's purification, two pigeons, and pay the ransom for a first born son: 5 whole day's wages. How had Joseph managed to get a hold of that sum? Had his sons helped him with that before going home? How had he and Mary managed to hold onto it in Bethlehem, where every penny was needed for survival? Perhaps they hadn't. The Torah does allow for the priests to mitigate the ransom for those too poor to pay. Were they perhaps hoping to look up a priest who was friends with Zechariah, the husband of Mary's cousin Elizabeth, and receive a favorable decision? Or maybe they'd borrowed the

sum and Jude was back in Bethlehem working to pay off the loan so they could return to Nazareth. Where ever the money was coming from, there was little to spare. It is a testament to their faith that they found the price of the ransom and sacrifices amidst such hardship.

Upon arriving at the Temple, Joseph and Mary made their way to the Court of the Gentiles to purchase the offering of the two pigeons, the offering of a poor woman for her purification. At that time, the Court of the Gentiles more closely resembled the barns at a state fair, than a church like this one: it was a noisy and smelly place. It was, therefore, a good thing that Jesus had been born in a stable, the little child was accustomed to the noise and smell of animals, and so didn't make a fuss.

Once the two birds were safely ensconced in a small wooden cage, one they were probably obliged to return to the seller on the way out, the couple made their way out of the noisy market of the outermost court. Entering the Court of the Women, they found a Levite to bring the offering for Mary's purification forward to the altar. As a woman, she wasn't permitted any closer, and so the temple staff, the Levites, would have received her offering and taken it to the altar. Joseph would have been able to go forward to watch the sacrifice, but Mary would have had to watch from afar using the stands in the Court of the Women made for that purpose. Separated in this fashion, how did they each feel about the event? For Mary this was the first time she had made this sort of offering. How did she feel looking down at the newborn son in her arms, the one announced by an angel, as she saw the birds burning on the altar at a distance? And what about Joseph? This was not his first time witnessing this ritual. What did he think of his dream, which had led to him accepting as his own a son not of his body, as he watched the smoke of the sacrifice rise from the altar?

And what of the ransom? Did Joseph take Jesus forward to pay it himself, or did a priest come out to receive it in the Court of the Women where the whole family could be present?

And then, after the sacrifice and the ransom, as the little family prepared to leave and make their way back to Bethlehem, events took an unexpected turn. An old man emerged from the crowd and took Jesus from Mary's arms. Who was this man? Did Joseph and Mary recognize old Simeon, a fixture of the temple area for years, whom they might have seen on previous pilgrimages? Did Mary let him take Jesus with a smile? Or were they shocked into paralysis, unable to resist a strange old man's insistence on holding their new son? And what he said concerning the child? The echos of Mary's encounter with the angel and Joseph's dream must have hit them like a ton of bricks coming out of this old man's mouth. And if that wasn't enough, as Simeon was returning Jesus to the safety of his mother's arms, an old woman who had seen Simeon's actions begins telling everyone who will listen, and several who won't, about the identity of the child. How uncomfortable Joseph and Mary must have been with eyes and attention on them as they left the Temple mount. If word of this reached Herod or the Romans...

But no, those are stories for another time. Today our focus is on that day in the Temple. On the confluence of the strange and the familiar. Of rituals performed according to long tradition, and acts of God which disrupt the ordinary.