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Christmas I  
December 29, 2024  
Text: Luke 2:22 – 40  
Title: Debt

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. They were still amazed that it had happened. The Israelites had been foreigners in the land of Egypt for exactly 430 years, and now the Lord had come to deliver them from the life of slavery that they had been forced into. Only 70 people had arrived in Egypt so long ago, but now 600,000 men plus women and children were leaving. As they began their journey it was clear that their God had finally come to save them. Yahweh had acted on their behalf and defeated for them the most powerful nation on earth, Egypt.

The past few months were very clear in their memories. Moses had returned to Egypt after being gone for forty years, and he had approached Pharaoh on behalf of the people of Israel. He had the nerve to demand that Pharaoh release them from service, and Pharaoh had responded with the predictable decision to punish his slaves with harder work. Oh, how they hated Moses then! He had no business speaking on their behalf, and his meddling had made their existence even worse than it had been.

But Moses insisted that he was acting under the command of the Lord God who had been with their father, Abraham, so many years ago. It seemed unlikely that he was telling the truth, but he kept going back to speak to Pharaoh and to demand their release. When Pharaoh predictably continued to refuse that's when the plagues began to happen.

At first it seemed like the plagues wouldn't have any effect on Pharaoh's decision because the Egyptian priests and magicians were able to duplicate the same things that Moses was causing. The first real plague was when Moses used his staff to turn the water of the Nile River into blood. It killed off all the fish in the water and brought a terrible stench to the land, but when the Egyptian magicians could do

the same thing, Pharaoh didn't give in. Next it was a plague of frogs, and thousands came upon the land. The magicians were also able to produce frogs, but they couldn't make them go away.

Each plague that came was worse than the one before, but from this point on not a single magician from Egypt could match what the Lord God brought to the land. A swarm of gnats was followed by a swarm of flies, and then a plague was sent against the livestock of the Egyptians, killing all of it, but not a single animal that belonged to an Israelite was killed. Next the Lord struck the people of Egypt directly by sending painful boils on all of them, and the magicians couldn't even stand before Pharaoh at this point.

The next three plagues damaged the land itself. First, it was a storm of hail that was so severe that it destroyed any remaining crops and killed any man or animal that was caught outside, but it didn't fall at all in the area that the Israelites lived in. Next, the Lord sent a swarm of locusts that ate any remaining plant in the land. It was so bad that Pharaoh pleaded with Moses to make them go away. Then, the Lord sent a plague of darkness covering only the Egyptian's homes, but left the Israelite's section of the land alone. All of this was all the proof that the Israelites needed that Moses really was acting on behalf of Yahweh, and by this point they were fully behind him and his mission.

None of them were prepared for what the Lord had planned next though. He gave Pharaoh and his people fair warning every step of the way to give in and release the Israelites. Before each plague was unleashed, Moses warned Pharaoh what was about to happen, and that was even the case with this final plague, the death of every firstborn male in Egypt. But Pharaoh still refused to listen. He refused to give in to the Word of God, and his entire nation paid the price for his stubbornness.

Now the people were finally free, and they were beginning their journey to the Promised Land of Canaan. They knew that the Lord had delivered them, and they knew that Moses was acting on His behalf. They knew that they owed the Lord a debt that they could never repay. That was why when

Yahweh made His claim on their firstborn, they were ready to listen to what He had to say to them at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

Even before He gave them the Ten Commandments, the Lord told His people through Moses, “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.’ Then Moses said to the people... ‘When the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the Lord's...Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the Lord all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’”

Redeem, it's not a common word anymore except in church-speak. It's the word that we get the term “redemption” from, but it has its roots in a more basic idea, to exchange or to buy something or someone back. And that is what the Lord required of His people after they were brought out of Egypt. For that deliverance alone they owed the Lord a debt that could never be repaid, and to make that point the Lord required that every first-born animal and son would belong to Him. But His demand wasn't as harsh as it sounds. Larger, more valuable animals that a person didn't want to lose could be exchanged for a sacrificial lamb, and a child was required to be redeemed by the same sacrifice, a lamb. If a couple was poor and couldn't afford a lamb to buy back or redeem their son, then they were given a reduced sacrifice of two turtledoves or two pigeons. Once that required sacrifice was made, the Lord gave up His rightful claim to the firstborn son, and the child could return to his parents without any other requirement needing to be fulfilled.

You might think that this is a strange reading for this time of the year. After all, today is still part of the Christmas celebration, and we've been talking about the Lord's Old Testament requirements for redeeming first-born sons and why He made that law for them. This is exactly what today's Gospel reading is describing to 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') and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.'" Luke is showing us one more way that Jesus kept the Law of God perfectly in every way required. By doing that, by keeping God's Law throughout His earthly life, Jesus accumulated no debt of sin at all, and when He sacrificed Himself He paid off our debt in full or to say it another way, He redeemed us.

And Jesus had to redeem us. He had to pay our debt to God because our sinful nature gets us in so deep that before we know what's happening we have no hope of paying our debt off on our own. It's like high interest on a loan, when you don't pay off the balance in full, you get an interest charge that adds to your balance. Each time you sin, the debt gets higher than you can ever hope to pay. The interest rates on sin are higher than any loan-shark would even charge you, because instead of an arm or a leg, the debt compounds instantly to cost you your very life. "For the wages of sin is death..." And even then, your debt won't be fully paid by the death of your body. It will also cost you the death of your immortal soul. Any sin, from taking the Lord's name in vain to coveting your neighbor's possessions requires a payment of death, both in body and soul. That's how deep your debt goes.

But as I've already said, Jesus, that tiny little baby whose birth we just celebrated and who is being redeemed by His parents in today's Gospel reading, was born for the very purpose of being the sacrifice that would pay your debt in full. He came here for that reason and for that reason alone.

Nothing was going to keep Jesus from doing His Father's will of redeeming us from the eternal death that we had justly earned and that we deserve.

The second part of today's Gospel reading, tells us what happened when the baby Jesus was brought into the temple for the first time. An old man named Simeon took the Lord into his arms, praised God and said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." Old Simeon knew that the baby he was holding in his arms wasn't just an average newborn. No, this child was salvation itself in the fulfillment of the Lord's long-awaited promise. This was the long-expected Messiah, King David's son, yet David's Lord, and through Simeon, the Holy Spirit proclaimed that He would bring light to all of this darkened world.

As if this wasn't enough, the Lord also brought a prophetess, Anna, to tell everyone in His temple that this child was special. One of the last verses of the reading says, "And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem." Through the same Holy Spirit she also knew that the arrival of Jesus was something special, and that the people of God were about to be redeemed.

Through the birth of His Son, our Lord has given you the richest gift that you'll ever receive. He has bought you back, He has redeemed you with His own precious blood. For the sake of Jesus, He has canceled your debt in full, and He has even applied the good works of His Son to your account, so that you receive credit for them as well. His perfect works serve as substitutes for your sinfully tainted ones. All of your debts to the Lord that have accrued because of your sin are now paid. Paid in full. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.