

The Purification of Saint Mary the Virgin and
The Presentation of Jesus Christ in the Temple
February 2nd, 2003

St. Mary's Church, HV
Philadelphia, PA

Homily by Janice L. Freeman, Ph.D.

+In the name of the One, Holy and Living God. Amen.

Opening Remarks:

Good morning. My name is Janice Freeman, and I am a parishioner here at St. Mary's. I'm speaking to you this morning as a member of the Women's Spiritual Sharing Group. This small group has been meeting together once a month for the past 8 years, and for the past three years, we have been a part of St. Mary's church.

I'm happy to be here this morning, in fact, you could say I have sought this opportunity. I feel downright evangelical when it comes to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

But I am also terrified. I have a life-long and apparently incurable fear of public speaking. This part of me is here only because I must be. I have been brought here by something that feels like a strong wind at my back.

As for your discomfort, I hope it will be minimal. Some parts of what I'll be talking about today are unusual as homily material.

I can't guarantee that you won't be made uncomfortable by them. But I'm hoping that you'll only feel that magical amount called "just uncomfortable enough". Just uncomfortable enough to keep you alert and listening.

Introduction:

Today's celebration commemorates two related events which happened on the same day— The first event is the purification of Mary following childbirth, and the second is the presentation of Jesus in the Temple.

Mary first participates in a ritual of purification so that she can then enter the sanctuary of the Temple and present her first-born son, Jesus to God.

Both of these rituals have a biblical source in Leviticus and Exodus and were prescribed by Hebrew law.

At St. Mary's today we will be focusing on the purification of Mary. We are celebrating today as our patronal feast day since it is the only feast of Mary that happens when school is in session.

Homily

Two of our texts today refer to “purification”—Specifically, the ritual purification following childbirth.. Luke 2:22 states, “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...” (RSV).

The second text is from Leviticus (Lev. 12:2-8). If asked to say what the book of Leviticus is about, I would have said, it is the book of laws. And it does contain numerous laws. But what Leviticus is really about is worship. Its codes and laws are pre-eminently about Worship. There are 6 major topics dealt with in Leviticus . One of them is the distinction between what is usually translated Clean and Unclean in English. But this translation leads us in the wrong direction. We miss meaning. We get a more accurate notion of this in English if we translate it Pure and Impure. Because, this is not primarily about hygiene or sanitation. It does NOT mean the same as when we say in English “Cleanliness is next to godliness”-- This is not what is meant in Leviticus. Something which is impure, ritually impure, is something which has become “unholy” in some way. Contact with something impure meant that a person must be symbolically cleansed before entering the Temple. This was part of their special covenant with God. As part of maintaining their special relationship with God, the Israelites were to avoid all that was defined or specified as impure. If they had come into contact with something impure, then God had given them particular things to do, rituals to perform in order to come into harmony with God again.

So the purification after childbirth, which we will discuss in more detail in a few moments, and the sacrifice of the lamb and the pigeon or turtle dove were ways of atoning, of coming into harmony with God anew. ...These were way of being made ritually pure, and permitted to enter the sanctuary of the Temple in Jerusalem. Prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 And now 70 CE, ritual purity had relevance only to those objects related to the Temple.

Focus with me on the need for purification after childbirth. We’ve said that this is not about hygiene or sanitation, but what is it about? Why does the woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus, Mary, the Mother of God, need to be made pure from the flow of her blood, from the flow of blood involved in childbirth?

It’s important to note that any idea that sex or sexuality were evil was completely ALIEN to the Israelites. But, what is it about blood, specifically menstrual blood and the blood involved in childbirth that made women “unholy”, put them out of harmony with God?

It is also important to note that it is not only the bodily fluids or discharges of women that create ritual impurity. The bodily discharges of men also resulted in ritual impurity. For instance in Leviticus 15:16ff “And if a man has an emission of semen, he shall bathe his whole body in water, and be unclean until evening. And every garment and every skin on which the semen comes shall be washed with water and be unclean until evening. If a man lies with a woman and has an emission of semen, both of them shall bathe themselves in water and be unclean until evening.”

As Charlotte Fonrobert points out, there is a symmetry between men and women in the matters
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of bodily discharges and ritual purity. This is not to say that men and women were equal, there are many inequities. The point of view of both biblical and rabbinic law is most definitely androcentric. But, there is a basic symmetry about the body. Men's bodies can transfer a status of impurity to anyone, just as women's bodily fluids can. The quality of impurity and its transmission is not exclusively or fundamentally female.

Turning back to the blood of childbirth. If this is not about hygiene or sexual aversion, what is it about? How could this make a woman unholy?

Blood to the Israelites represented life itself and they were prohibited from eating the blood of an animal. These prohibitions are spelled out in the section of Leviticus called the Holiness Code. "If any man of the house of Israel or of the strangers that sojourn among them eats blood, I will set my face against that person who eats blood, and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood...For the life of every creature is in the blood of it" (Lev.17: 10 and 14). Blood, then, is life itself. Blood contains the life source, is the life source in some way. It is very holy and it can create ritual impurity.

This idea that something which is holy or sacred can also be the polar opposite, a taboo, is paradoxical. It cannot be apprehended logically. This idea appears in all cultures.

There is nothing inherently unholy about childbirth. Women themselves describe the experience of childbirth as intensely erotic and/or a terrifying near-death experience. Both of these categories of experience are universally considered encounters with the divine, the sublime.

To come back to our main theme, in the code of the Israelites, childbirth created a ritual impurity. In Luke's Gospel, our Gospel for today, Mary has given birth to her child, Jesus, in the way of all women. There has been blood in this birthing. To repeat the paraphrase of St. Leo which Jim quoted at Christmas time,

"Christ who was conceived by God, first in the mind of Mary and then in her body, is delivered to us this night, clothed in her blood."

And Mary, following the customs of her people and the practices of her religion, went to the Temple to be purified through a ritual immersion, and through an animal sacrifice. And then to present her first-born son, Jesus to God in the Temple.

In later centuries, Christianity disembodies Mary and robs her of erotic and terrifying experience, and makes her ever virginal. But here, she is wholly woman.

We would like to read to you—Carol LaBelle will do the reading—a contemporary description by a Jewish woman, Blu Greenberg, of what it is like to go to the mikveh, to the ritual pool, and to participate in this special ritual immersion which is the first part of the purification rite.

Imagine this done reverently, with great meaning. Imagine this as a soul event , a prayer of the body. Imagine yourself participating in such a ritual. Men also went to the Mikveh to be purified. Notice the similarity to baptism. Fourth century accounts of Christian baptism are remarkably like this.

(Adapted from Blu Greenberg, On Women and Judaism: a View from Tradition, Pp. 110-111)
Before entering the ritual pool, the Mikveh, you must bathe, but even before bathing you must prepare yourself. You brush your teeth, rinse your mouth, trim your nails, and remove all dentures, rings, anything that is not part of your body. After this, then you bathe. (This elaborate ritual of cleansing, is further proof that the mikveh has nothing to do with personal hygiene or cleanliness.)

After bathing, you rinse yourself again in the shower. You comb out your hair, which you have just shampooed, and wrap yourself in a white sheet or towel. Now you are ready to enter the ritual pool, the mikveh. The mikveh, which is Hebrew for “gathering”, is a pool of “living” water, gathered from rain or from a spring used for ritual purification.

The mikveh attendant checks to see if you have prepared yourself properly. Holding on to the side of the rail, you walk down a few steps to the bottom of the mikveh—the water is about shoulder height. With mouth and eyes closed, arms at your sides, but not touching the side walls, you bend your knees in a crouching position and go completely under. If you have long hair you have to go a little deeper, so that every strand of hair is under the water. You don’t have to stay under the water for even an extra second. All you have to do is immerse yourself completely and then come right up. If you’ve done it right (every bit of you below the water line) your mikveh attendant will pronounce it “kosher”.

Then, standing in the water you recite the blessing, Blessed are You O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us by His commandments and commanded us concerning immersion.

Other blessings are often added.

After the blessings, you dip under two more times; each time, the mikveh attendant pronounces it “kosher”. Then you come up the steps, and the attendant wraps a white sheet around you.

The purification is complete.

The Purification of Mary is not about hygiene or cleanliness or about contempt of disgust for the body or sexuality. Mary’s ritual immersion was a profoundly religious act, based on a deeply felt sense that we must prepare ourselves in a special way to come close or closer to God . To be united anew with God after our involvement with events both sacred and profane.

We are regularly in need of rituals which lead us to inhabit our bodies in a changed way, to move at a different pace and rhythm, with a different consciousness, a new state of

mind.

need rituals which increase our awareness of the invisible realm and rituals which “pitch
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us out toward the invisible Mystery” (Ryan) and facilitate our encounter with it.
We are right now, today, in this very moment, in this Liturgy engaged in a series of
rituals designed to purify our hearts and minds, and to pitch us toward an encounter with
God in today’s Eucharist.

Let us continue what we have begun. + Amen.

Other references cited in the text:

Charlotte E. Fonrobert, Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstruction of
Biblical Gender, 2000.

Thomas Ryan, Prayer of Heart and Body, 1995.