Most of you that have children or have spent much time around children have, at one time or another, found yourself caught in “why” feedback loop (which is different than an OODA loop for you Air Force people out there). A why feedback loop is when your child keeps asking why to every answer you give. It may start innocently enough with a question about why they should eat their vegetables but eventually reaches a point where you find yourself unable to explain why exactly the nitrates found in beets are beneficial to your blood pressure and for that matter what blood pressure is and why you would want it to be lower. This game can be exasperating because through a non-stop assault of whys, things that are true suddenly appear to have no purpose. Think about it for a second. Many of the things that we do in everyday life, if subjected to enough whys, become completely unjustifiable. Things like: “Why do we send out birthday cards?” or “Why do I eat French fries?” or “Why do I watch football?” There are a whole host of things that we do that cannot be fully justified or explained. I thought about this when I was reflecting on our Gospel reading today where we hear, “When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, the parents of Jesus brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.’"

So here is the first question: If Jesus is the Son of God, fully man and fully divine, why would he need to go through this ritual? Maybe he went through this ritual because he was fully human and he was Jewish so he did all of the things that good Jews were supposed to do. Which is true. Added to that is the fact that Jesus was eight days old so there is not a whole lot that he could do about it anyways. And these are all decent enough answers but they would not survive two minutes in a locked room with a four year old. Because you would eventually find yourself having to not only justify why Jesus participated in this ritual but why this ritual exists and for that matter why any religious ritual exists? The first answer is not that hard. This ritual exists to fulfill what the law required at the birth of a child. It’s spelled out in the Book of Numbers and basically harkens back to the whole killing of the firstborn that took place during the Passover before the Israelites left Egypt. But how about the second question why do we have rituals like the one Jesus participates in today? And for that matter why does Jesus participate in any ritual? That is why was Jesus baptized, why did he go to a wedding feast and why did he celebrate the Passover Feast? Why does Jesus, through his actions, give legitimacy to certain traditions, rituals, rites or whatever you want to call them? And why are we as Christians also called to participate in these rituals? I mean wouldn’t our lives be the same if we didn’t do them. They are not like food, shelter or sleep. Rituals do not meet the basics of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, so why do them?

The great Austrian Economist and professor at Freiburg University, Friedrich Hayek said, “If we stopped doing everything for which we do not know the reason, or for which we cannot provide a justification in the sense demanded, we would probably very soon be dead.” This may seem an odd quote but think it through for a minute. I mean most of us would never make it out of childhood if our parents hadn’t done stuff that did not pass the why test, because the type of self-sacrificial love required to raise children can really not be logically justified. I mean kids are expensive, they cry, they make messes and light stuff on fire for fun, on a logical level they don’t really deserve to be taken care of. Any parent’s love and care is ultimately unjustifiable. But here is the thing it is the unjustifiable things that not only keep us alive, but also make life worth living. Similarly we come to church every Sunday and participate in rituals that may look odd. Why do we stand for the Gospel, why do we kneel to receive the Eucharist, in fact why do we have Eucharist at all? All of these things cannot be fully justified nor fully understood and yet they connect us to God and help us grow into God’s likeness.

If you remember back to the French Revolution there were a lot of kooky things that went on, but I think the kookiest may have been the so-called *Temples of Reason*. These started to be a big deal in 1793 and kind of petered out by 1794. The Notre Dame was converted into one of these and in so doing the altar was dismantled and an altar to Liberty was installed inscribed with the words *To Philosophy*. Instead of acolytes, festive girls in white Roman dress and tricolor sashes milled around with a costumed Goddess of Reason who impersonated Liberty (whatever that means). And instead of candles a flame burned on the altar, which was symbolic of truth. All very reasonable and justifiable, none of this unreasonable hocus pocus that Christian churches transacted in. Concurrent with this was another famous event of the French Revolution which had a less fun name, *The Reign of Terror*. During this roughly one-year event there were 16,594 official death sentences in France. Robespierre described it in this way, “Terror is nothing more than speedy, severe and inflexible justice; it is thus an emanation of virtue.” Now I know that correlation is not causation, but you do have to wonder if all of the so-called non-reasonable Christian rituals did something to keep the reign of terror at bay. I mean it didn’t happen in 1792 when they had Eucharist and other rites of the church going on at the Notre Dame. Participation in the tradition and liturgy of the Church does something we cannot always describe or justify by linking us to God in ways we cannot fully understand nor articulate.

With rituals we can say that we should do them because Jesus did, i.e. Jesus was baptized, Jesus instituted the Eucharist and so on. And those are not wrong answers, but I would say they are incomplete answers. Just like the participation of Jesus in these Jewish rituals we hear about today, these rituals are a place where we meet God. God does not ask us to participate in liturgy and ritual to see if we are obedient, he asks us because they are instruments of his grace. Someday I may preach a whole sermon on the Eucharist, but the quick version of why we participate in it is because we are being fed with spiritual food. Christ is truly present in this sacrament and through it we draw closer to God. And just like most of what we do, it will not stand up to an onslaught of whys or how’s, but nonetheless it provides the link between human and divine that not only makes life worth living but gives us the ability to continue on in hope and joy. They make us realize that we do not understand everything in a rational sense but we do understand in a deeper sense. In Psalm 63 David says this, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” The rituals that we cannot fully grasp are the water in a dry and weary land because they give to us something that is beyond what we can see or know. We are drawn to rituals because they explain, without using words or reason our connection to God. Reason has it uses, but when dealing with the sustainer and creator of the universe it often falls short and so God gives us a path to him that goes beyond our ability to explain so that we may be his both now and forevermore.