

The Sorrow of Christmas

Introduction: Read Luke 2:22-35

The story you just heard, is a lesser known part of the Christmas story. But you see, the birth of Jesus is really just the very beginning. As all devout Jewish parents did, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem, a very special place for Jews where heaven and earth met. From what we gather, their visit to the temple as recorded by Luke, was a three- in- one visit. There was the purification of Mary, forty days after giving birth; the presentation of the firstborn to God (Ex. 13:2) and the dedication of the firstborn into the Lord's service (1 Samuel 1-2). While they were at the temple, we are introduced to an old, seemingly insignificant man by the name of Simeon. We are told he was a righteous and devout man from Jerusalem who was waiting a long time for the Lord's Messiah and the consolation or comfort of Israel. This is all we know about Simeon. As far as we know, he was not a priest, just an old man visiting the temple.

But Simeon knows something. Simeon has been told by the Holy Spirit of God that he would not die before he has seen the Lord's Messiah, or the Christ. Like the other everyday people in the Christmas story, Joseph and Mary, Elizabeth and Zechariah and the shepherds, God is speaking to them in very special ways. Simeon had waited, we presume, a very long time, but that time had now come. Very clearly, we are told, the Holy Spirit led Simeon to the temple on that same week, the same day, the same hour and the same minute and second when Mary and Joseph were at the temple. In other words, this moment was no coincidence. Led by the Holy Spirit, Simeon then took the baby Jesus into his arms.

This part always gives me a little chuckle. Would you trust a stranger to hold your newborn Mothers? What if you were at the mall and a strange old man said to you, "May I hold your baby?" Apparently Mary did. As he took the baby in his arms he said a prayer of blessing to God, thanking him that he can now die in peace because God has fulfilled his promise to him. He has seen with his own eyes God's salvation in Jesus. Somehow, by the Holy Spirit, Simeon understood that through this child, light would come to the Gentiles and for his own people Israel.

When Mary and Joseph heard Simeon's prayer, they were amazed by what he said. Mary and Joseph both heard from God's angels about who their son would be. But now they heard from a complete stranger that confirmed within their hearts that their son Jesus would be used of God in a truly significant way.

But what Simeon says to Mary next comes as a complete surprise. Pretty much everything that took place in Luke before this very moment is filled with light, stars, joy, angels, birth, singing, wonder and awe. All of this is the part of Christmas story that we so love and enjoy; and we should. But led by the Spirit, Simeon had more to say. Simeon looks straight at Mary and says this:

"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34-35).

You kind of want to say to Simeon, "Simeon, thanks for ruining Christmas!"

Why has Simeon gone off key? Why the bitter note?

This second part of Simeon's words are relatively unknown. We don't sing about it in our Christmas carols. We don't read this part of the Christmas story very often. I call it the sorrow of Christmas. But

you see, Simeon's prophetic words actually carry the deep meaning of Christmas. After all, Christmas is not simply about everything sweet and nice. Don't get me wrong. Christmas is light and joy and peace. I don't want to sound like Ebenezer Scrooge. I love Christmas. Christmas baking is amazing. Cheryl has to hide her Christmas making from me. We love the decorations, the new led lights. We enjoy seeing once again our favorite Christmas ornaments that lay hidden in boxes for 11 months. We love getting together with friends and family. We love gifts and giving gifts. But Simeon's prophecy concerning Jesus is filled with sorrow. And you might, think, well that isn't a very good thing is it? So, let's try to make sense of Simeon's words. What is Simeon saying to us?

- Jesus causes conflicted relationships

In the first part of Simeon's prophecy he says, he will cause "falling and rising" and that he will be a "sign that will be spoken against." It is basically saying, people will be polarized because of Jesus and many will oppose Jesus. Jesus will be the cause of differing opinions about him that leads to conflicted relationships. Try writing that in your Christmas cards. "May Jesus be the cause of your conflicts this season!" Now of course, Jesus has not intentionally brought conflict. Jesus was as non-violent as they come. But here is the issue.

We must understand that the light of Christmas in Jesus also exposes the darkness. This is why Simeon also said, "that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed." Who people really are, what they think and what their deepest secrets are, will be exposed. And so Simeon's prophecy came true.

When Jesus broken into the world he came as the unrecognized divine King. He was in fact God in human flesh, the King of all Kings, the Creator of the world. People were amazed by his authority through his miracles and teaching. He cast out demons and calmed the sea, demonstrating his authority over evil and chaos. Some people followed Jesus. But as the apostle John said, in John 3:19-20, when the light came (meaning Jesus) people "loved darkness instead of the light because their works were evil." You see, people hate the light of Christ because it exposes them for who they are. Jesus became a threat to people because it made them look very bad. If Jesus truly is the way, the truth and the life, this means Jesus is the exclusive way to God. This eliminated all the gods of Rome. Today, when the world says there are many roads that lead to God, Jesus will be opposed and hated for being exclusive.

- Jesus exposed the heart of the religious person who thought they were good enough for God.
- Jesus became a threat to religious and political leaders who held power and wanted to eliminate Him.
- Jesus was rejected because many wanted Jesus to destroy their enemies by force while Jesus came to lay down his life for them.
- Jesus was detested because he ate with sinners.

Some version of this is repeated ever generation and our generation. Jesus has always invited hostility. Today people like the fact that Jesus was a loving and forgiving person, but to say that Jesus is the exclusive way to God, is rejected out of hand. Why? Because it ruins their own foundations. No one likes to admit they built their house on a foundation of sand.

This past summer, a gentleman came by for some food. After he loaded his food in his truck, we got talking about faith and Christianity. Coming to a church for food will do that sometimes. He said he had a religious background but that lay way in the past. But he started talking about a religious friend in his life, presumably a Christian, who used to preach to him about Christianity. He liked his friend but he didn't like the preaching. Then he looks at me and said, "So don't be preaching at me!." I think there a good ways and bad ways to share the good news of Jesus. But even if we shared the gospel well doesn't

guarantee people will not be offended by Jesus. Why? As John said, when the light came into the world, people loved the darkness more than the light. They have built walls around their life in order to protect themselves and save themselves leaving no room for Jesus.

Simeon's words are a reality check for the church. Yes, God wants you to be light in a dark world. But expect pushback. Be convinced of who Jesus is and why he came, but just as Jesus and the early church was persecuted, don't be alarmed by opposition. Simeon's words also say...

- Jesus will cause conflict within us

Simeon said to Mary, "A sword will pierce your soul too" (Luke 2:35). We know this happened. Mary stood nearby and watched the gruesome death of her son (John 10:25). Mary had heard from the angels who her son was going to be, the Christ, the Messiah who would save people from their sins. But like everyone else, Mary had absolutely no expectation this meant her son would die in this gruesome way. Nor did she know he would rise from the dead on the third day. Can you imagine just how confused she must have been? She had hopes and dreams for her son fueled by the angel's promise. But now all her hopes and dreams came crushing down as she watched him die. Yes, a sword did pierce her soul that day. Jesus will cause conflict within our own souls too.

So how should we understand this conflict of our soul, your soul? Think about this way.

- God's peace comes to us only after the pain of repentance.

When we are confronted by who Jesus is you are confronted by two truths.

Truth one: Jesus is God in human flesh who died to save us from our sins. When we understand that only Jesus can save us from our sins, this leads us to truth number two.

Truth two: We must repent of our sins and trust in Jesus Christ to save us.

What is repentance?

Repentance is like an antiseptic. You pour antiseptic on a wound to disinfect it, but it stings horribly. In the old days, they used to heat a piece of iron over fire and burn in on the wound to kill the infection. In the same way, when you repent of your sins you must painfully and sorrowfully admit you have offended God and are a sinner. Repentance causes deep inner turmoil because you have to admit your pride, your weakness, your vulnerabilities that are hard to admit.

Maybe your inner turmoil might sound something like this: "But God, you don't understand. I'm the victim here. I have tried hard to be a good person and I haven't hurt anyone. Why should I repent?" Many people feel hard-done by in their lives. We blame others and even blame God. But each person in our own way must admit that we have tried to manage our life without God. Many hurt people have built up thick and hardened emotional walls because they are trying to protect themselves from pain and hurt they have suffered. But, God knows your sorrows. The only way to find God's peace and forgiveness is to finally admit to God that yes, I have sinned against you by trying to save my life in my own feeble way. And so, repentance means, we finally admit that our own ways to save our life against being hurt leads to futility.

But the good news is this; Jesus has come to bring us his peace, hope and joy. But each of us must go through this inner conflict within our soul of our own pride and sinfulness before we experience God's new peace. The way of sorrow comes before the way of peace. But there is another part.

- God's peace comes as we surrender to Jesus

In Romans 6-8, Paul describes the inner conflict between our old life and the new life. Your old self of trying to save your life rears its ugly head and wants to take control; but the new life in Christ knows that God's peace comes by surrendering our will, our own life to Christ and letting God have his way in our life. We experience this when we first become Christians. But this can also be the experience of seasoned Christians.

Some of you know the story of Joni Erickson Tada. When she was a teenager, she dove into the lake; hit her head on a rock and became a quadriplegic for life. She lost her ability to use all of her limbs. Joni's condition was very severe and she became angry and bitter. But one day as God ministered to her, she finally said to God, "God, I don't have the right to tell you how to run the universe." After that moment of repentance and surrender, Joni became a new person from the inside out. Even though she would always be in a wheel chair, God has used her testimony, her writings, art and even music to encourage many. But she had to fight through her sorrow and bitterness and finally surrender before she could experience God's peace and purpose for her life.

As long as we stay stubbornly bitter or filled with self-pity, God can't force himself upon us, and his peace cannot come. But the sword that pierces the soul means that just as Jesus brought salvation and peace through the sorrow of his suffering and death, our salvation and peace must also go through the sorrow of repentance and surrender of our life to God. It means the Christian life will not be a bed of roses. We should expect opposition and conflict. We should expect the sorrow of the soul as we enter spiritual conflict.

But, the Christian message also says, when we die with Christ, we also resurrect with Christ. Romans 6 says, "We were buried there with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by his glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." This isn't just theological mumble jumble. This is the necessary sorrow of Christmas.

You can only have true lasting peace when you pass through the sorrow of Jesus' death" All of us were lost in our own sorrow, trying to save ourselves. But Jesus experienced all our sorrows and sin. Isaiah even called him the man of sorrows acquainted with grief who was despised and rejected and hung on the cross for us. But by repenting of our old self run life we die with Christ so that we won't be enslaved to it anymore. It means that when we surrender our life to Jesus Christ as our Savior, we join his resurrection life and live our lives through the power of God's presence each and every day. The peace and joy of Christmas must first pass through the sorrow of Christmas. And when we do, by God's grace, he saves us and changes us.

The Lord's supper texts for meditation: Isaiah 53:3 and Hebrews 4:15