

Luke 2:22-40

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 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 turtle-doves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,  
according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Sermon: Nativity Story - Director's Cut

I would like to thank all of you who have gathered in church this morning and want to assure you that whatever we might lack in numbers we make up for in enthusiasm. Of course when I was writing this sermon I could not know how many of us would be here today, but based on experience I thought it would be a select group - a marked difference from the Christmas eve crowd. And I thought that because you are a select group, you were entitled to some extra features, something the holiday churchgoer might not appreciate, but you would find interesting - at least I hope so.

When people come to church on Christmas eve they expect to hear a familiar story - Mary and Joseph, angels, shepherds, wise men, baby Jesus. That is the central core of the Nativity story. But there are other scenes, other characters, that get left on the cutting room floor when we only have one night to tell the story. The whole Nativity Story, as the director originally intended it, takes some time to develop to the point where the baby is born, and in the full uncut version, has several scenes to explore the aftermath of the event. Today we explore one of those scenes as presented in the Gospel of Luke.

In order to understand this scene we have to first understand why the story of the birth of Jesus in the bible at all. Historical evidence tells us that the Gospels began with the preaching of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Luke is actually a two part book - the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts - and in Acts Luke gives us the first sermon ever preached - it is Peter who is speaking:

Acts 2:22-24 "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you

crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

So the preaching of the church, and the written Gospels which eventually emerged from that preaching, started at the end of the story and worked their way backwards. The Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John tell us nothing of the birth of Jesus, but Matthew and Luke, in spite of the different stories they tell, both felt it was a topic worth including. Why?

It has to do with the question of whether or not Jesus was really a human being like you and I. In the hymn, *Once in Royal David's City*, we sing this line:  
he was little, weak, and helpless,  
tears and smiles like us he knew  
thus he feels for all our sadness  
and he shares in all our gladness

But early on there was a competing idea about Jesus - that he was not a human being but a divine spirit that entered a human body at baptism and left that human body on the cross. This idea carried with it the conclusion that because the things of this earth are passing, and because the world is full of suffering, that this mortal life has no worth and is nothing more than a heavy dirty garment we must shed to achieve unity with divine glory. Through secret teaching Jesus provides a way for us not to redeem this life but to renounce it and to ascend from this material muck and mire to a heavenly purity of light and knowledge.

In our own time we have seen how some madmen have used the Gospel to induce people to renounce their lives and taken them on a journey of self-destruction under the guise of freedom from the troubles of this world and ascension to a place of glory - people like Jim Jones and David Koresh are the most notable, but I think we can be quite sure that this mutation of the Christian message was not eradicated with their self-destruction but continues in a myriad of forms in lesser measure in many shadowy places throughout the church.

If the Gospel is about redeeming human life, then Jesus must have been a human being, and if he was a human being, he must have been born a real person to real parents - that, then, is part of the story.

Matthew and Luke give us this story, and although there are many differences of detail, they share a common narrative line - in both stories Jesus is born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem. In both stories there is a heavenly intervention to a group of strangers that causes them to seek out the baby in Bethlehem - in Matthew this is a star that guides the Magi, in Luke it is angels who give instructions to the shepherds. In both Gospels these strangers come to Bethlehem, worship and believe, and then go back to their places, and do not figure further in the story.

But in both Gospels that is not the last scene of the Nativity story - in both Gospels there is an aftermath. In Matthew it is quite a horrible scene - Herod sends the soldiers into Bethlehem to massacre the innocent children while Jesus, Mary and Joseph escape into Egypt. In Luke the scene is quite peaceful, but, nonetheless, an element of foreboding is introduced when Simeon says:  
"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

The great biblical scholar Raymond Brown writes about this passage: Neither (Gospel writer) is satisfied to end the nativity on a totally positive note with the acceptance of Jesus by magi and shepherds. Each evangelist uses the aftermath of the birth to introduce the same passion and suffering motif. Opposition must be depicted or predicted for that is the history of the good news as the two evangelists knew it, writing some fifty years after the death of Jesus. By some the good news has been accepted, and they have come and

worshipped; but by others it has been rejected and vigorously opposed, and their rejection has produced a division in Israel.

So almost in the same breath with a blessing of peace comes a prophecy of opposition and heartache - because this too is part of what it means to be fully human, and especially if you are seeking to follow a path of righteousness in a world where self-serving hypocrisy has infected even the sacred precincts of the temple and the halls of justice.

This final scene of the Nativity story also serves as an antidote to a very popular line of contemporary preaching that presents the Gospel as the path to every richness and blessing that wishful thinking can dangle before our eyes. The power of positive thinking, the gospel of prosperity, health and wealth, name it and claim it - what ever it's called, this mutation of the Gospel is a denial of the reality of limits, of life's resistance to our plans and aspirations at times, of faith's role in helping us simply bear with the pain of a sword that has pierced our soul and see it through rather than claiming some false victory and denying the severity of the struggle.

Besides being a moneymaking machine for the mega-churches, this line of preaching has turned what should be a gospel of comfort in times of affliction into a gospel of accusation as people fault themselves for their own lack of faith when their fervent prayers and cherished hopes do not deliver the results they so earnestly desire. No, Jesus prayed to be spared the cup of suffering, but in the end had simply to say: Not my will, but thine be done.

If we rightly understand the story of the Nativity, if we observe it's every scene and are sensitive to it's entire message, we see the whole Gospel proclaimed: that God became fully human in the person of Jesus, and that in his birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection is the redemption of all humanity and the salvation of our souls.

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel."