



Sunday, December 20, 2020

The Fourth Sunday in Advent

Rev. Dr. Michael R. Fitzgerald, Senior Pastor

“The Prophecy of Simeon”

Luke 2:25-35 (King James Version)

Good morning! Glad to see everyone here on the Sunday before Christmas. My prayer is that we have excitement, praise, and thanksgiving for our God this day. We know He blesses us with His presence. Many of us are in different stages in life—a family saying goodbye to a loved one and children who are so excited about Christmas.

As I begin this sermon, I've thought about what that first Christmas was like. I see Joseph and Mary going to this peaceful, perhaps snow-covered village of Bethlehem. Although there was no room for them in the inn, there was a place for them in a warm barn provided for them so that Jesus could be born in some relative comfort. It's a very serene picture that has developed in my mind over the years—a picture of cattle, sheep, and maybe candles in the windows of that quiet town as they looked out. In reality...it's quite a different picture! Dr. J. Vernon McGee said “Don't get your theology from Christmas cards.” We see those lovely cards about peace and miss the reality: Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem after a grueling 90 mile journey from Nazareth; it wasn't a trip they chose. A tyrant of a ruler demanded they, along with everyone in the Roman Empire, go to the city of their family's birth to be registered for a base of taxation which would raise the money that would come into the leadership of that Empire. The road was not easy—it was long, filled with potholes and stones, and in areas thieves hid in bushes. I'm sure as Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem with Mary in the last days of her pregnancy they were exhausted. They arrive to find the town way over capacity of the people they could handle. Bethlehem was a quiet village—the city of David's birth—so it was an important city. There were so many people desperately looking for a place to stay for the night. Somehow, and it's not recorded, God provided a barn for Joseph and Mary. The barn was not heated and in the cold, the Christ Child came into the world. He arrived in a hard way; I want us to remember that as we consider what Christmas is about. Thirty-three years later as a human being He left the world in a hard way—by way of a cross so He would atone and pay for the sins we have committed. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God and the Son of God, arrived in a hard way and left in a hard way so we might have life everlasting.

As we think about this first Christmas and the manger, God put Himself in the hardest circumstances of a sinful world simply because He came looking for me and you that we might know salvation, forgiveness, hope, peace, and an assurance of an eternal home in heaven. God Himself stepped out of the glory of heaven coming to a manger in the hardest way then going out of this world in the hardest way by a cross because He was looking for us. He wanted us to be saved, to be His children, his sons and daughters. That's the sole reason for the manger and the sole reason for the cross. He wanted you and me to be saved and belong to Him. How could we do less than worship Him today? How could we do less than give Him honor, glory, praise, and blessing for what He did?

After the birth of Jesus in the manger, Mary and Joseph proceed to raise their baby in the way all Jewish families did. While they knew this baby was the Son of God and Joseph and Mary knew by the revelation of God that her pregnancy was brought about by the Holy Spirit, they knew they were raising someone very special in the eyes of God and in the history of the world. Yet they raised Him as a common baby in the Jewish culture. On the eighth day according to Luke 2:21, the baby was circumcised according to the law. They also officially named Him the name God gave to Him—Jesus. You remember God gave the name to Joseph as he was struggling over this pregnant woman he was about to marry. They were espoused, but the woman he was going to marry was pregnant and God said this is the Son of God, name Him Jesus. That name was revealed to Mary before she conceived that she would carry the Son of God, and His name would be Jesus. In Leviticus 12:2-5 a woman is called unclean after

birth—forty days after the birth of a son and eighty days after the birth of a daughter. During that time she could not approach the grounds or inside of the temple. Let me point out that “uncleanness” did not mean a woman was dirty or contaminated. It means her body is being restored after the shedding of blood during the birth process. When Jesus was one month and ten days old and the time of her uncleanness was over, Joseph and Mary take Him to the temple in Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord God and dedicate Him. Every Jewish family who was true to the faith of God did the same thing. Probably every day of the year during the temple’s open hours there were couples bringing their babies to be dedicated before God—it was a common act. So Mary and Joseph did nothing that was out of the ordinary. Today’s passage picks up there: Luke 2:25-35.

I’m going a little farther than the usual Christmas story Scripture. In thirty-eight years here, I’ve not preached on this passage. Joseph and Mary met a very godly man when they brought Jesus to the temple. His name was Simeon; he was definitely Jewish and most likely lived in Jerusalem several years. He was a common presence in the temple because he had a wonderful, deep relationship with God Almighty. As he grew older, God gave him an assurance that may have answered a request of his—before Simeon died, he was going to see the Messiah, the Savior of God sent to the world. Hear these words: ²⁵And behold there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. ²⁶And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷And he came by the Spirit into the temple and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, ²⁸Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said ²⁹Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: ³⁰For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, ³¹Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; ³²A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. ³³And Joseph and his mother marveled at those things which were spoken of him. ³⁴And Simeon blessed them and said unto Mary his mother, Behold this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; ³⁵(Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.” May God add His blessing on the reading of the Scripture on this Sunday before Christmas.

As we look at Simeon, Scripture says the Holy Ghost or the Holy Spirit rested on him. Remember this is the period of time before Pentecost when the church was born. As a child of God, when you accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, the Spirit of God moves into our hearts and lives and does not depart. In the Old Testament day we can see the Spirit of God rested on one but God could lift that Spirit off that person. In today’s Scripture we see the Spirit of God regularly rested on Simeon. He had this close, unique walk with God as his Father. He was unusually spiritual; I think of him in terms of Abraham. In James 2:23, he was described as the “Friend of God”—I think the same description fits Simeon. He and God conversed with one another; the line of communication was always open between them. Simeon listened to the Word of God and followed the walk of God every day. God assured him he would not pass away until he had seen the Savior, the Christ. On one blessed day God directed Simeon to go to the temple. He said something’s going to happen there that will change your life, so be sure and go.

As Simeon stands at the temple grounds, he sees a couple arriving. There were probably other couples coming to present and dedicate their newborn babies to the Lord, but there was something different about this couple. As they walked toward Simeon, he felt the hand of God on his shoulder—that he was to approach this particular couple with this particular baby. In our day and age if you were to meet a strange man on the corner who asked if he could hold your baby, most mommas would say no! but in that culture it was common for that to happen. Simeon asked permission to hold the baby in his arms. I assume Mary was carrying Jesus, and as she laid him in Simeon’s arms, he blesses God and prays to Him. When Jesus prayed outside the tomb of Lazarus, He turned His eyes to heaven and blessed his resurrection. I believe Simeon, a “friend of God,” prayed heavenward too and said Lord, now I can depart this earth because I’m holding the Messiah. You have revealed to me through this couple You have given

the Christ to the world, and I'm overwhelmed I'm holding Him in my arms. Read Luke 2:30-31 again. Simeon says two important things about this baby in his arms. (1) As he looks at the face of this little boy, he sees salvation in his arms. To me this says salvation does not come by saying a prayer, being baptized, having your name on a church roll, being a Biblical scholar, being moral or good. What Simeon is saying salvation comes by knowing Jesus Christ in a personal relationship; I'm looking at salvation in the face as I hold this baby. Salvation comes by Jesus Christ and knowing Him, walking with Him, and allowing Him to walk with us. Salvation is the face of Jesus. Jesus said it well Himself "I am the way, the truth, and the life and no man comes to the Father but by Me." Simeon says the same thing—the only way to come to my friend, God, is to come through this baby Jesus the Christ. We surrender, worship, honor, praise Him, live for Him, and give our lives to Him. Salvation has a face; salvation has come and it has a name—Jesus. (2) Read Luke 2:32. As this old man looks at this baby in his arms, he says here's the Savior of my family, Israel. Here is the Messiah of the Jews. Here's the one who has come to save us, forgive us, give us life everlasting. If you look back at verse Luke 2:25, it says Simeon was looking for the consolation of Israel. The Greek word for consolation is "paraklesis" which means comfort, peace, hope of Israel. Simeon was looking for the Messiah, the Savior of the Jews, to come to his family alone. We see, however, God opens Simeon's view—Jesus is not just the Savior to the Jews, He's the Savior to us all; the light to the Gentiles. Simeon knows He's not just his family's Savior but the world's Savior I'm holding in my arms.

That's our good news, church. We're not preaching the gospel to a certain color or nation of people; not to a certain group of people with financial standing. We're preaching the gospel to an entire world because Jesus came for us all. Praise God our message is worldwide, and it's meant for every person of every race to come to Him. Jew and Gentile alike—that's good news for me. I'm 100% Gentile; there's not a drop of Jewish blood in me. I need a Savior—all of us do. Jesus came for us all; that's what He said to old Simeon as held that baby in his arms.

In his meeting with Mary, Joseph and Jesus on the temple grounds, Simeon looks at Mary and talks to her specifically. I wonder why he left Joseph out. I think after Jesus' birth is recorded and after we see Joseph when Jesus is twelve years old, he disappears from Scripture. It seems Joseph died when Jesus was young. Simeon speaks to Mary because she's going to live long-term and will watch Jesus grow. Simeon gives Mary three statements found in verses 34-35: (1) This child is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel. This baby in my arms will either be a stepping stone to God or a stumbling stone away from God; there will be no middle ground. This is the Savior—He is the way and the truth. You will step up to God through Him or you will reject Him and stumble away from God. You will either rise or fall upon the life of this little one as He grows to be an adult and becomes the Savior of the world. If you accept Jesus in faith, you'll rise up to salvation and have God's blessing, favor, and honor. If you reject, ridicule or ignore Him, you will be lost and stumble away from God and heaven and toward hell, guilt, and unforgiveness. It's your decision! (2) Jesus will be a sign spoken against. I remind you the miracles of Jesus were called signs—physical evidence of the power of God. Jesus is the human sign of God that we have the Savior who came for us. When we see Him through the pages of Scripture as a human being, the perfect Lamb of God coming to us and then dying on the cross, we see the sign of God that He loves us and wants to save us. As Simeon speaks to Mary he says in your lifetime as Jesus' mother, you will hear Him spoken against. Not all will receive Him, believe Him, or come to Him as Savior. Not all will welcome Him into their lives. Many will criticize, blaspheme, and reject Him publicly. Simeon says one day, not only will people speak against Him they'll speak accusations against Him. She'll know He's been falsely accused of crime and given the sentence of the old rugged cross; He'll be rejected as the Savior. He'll be tried, beaten, crowned with thorns, sentenced as a criminal. (3) This is painful to hear—Mary, a sword will pass through your heart also. We know what she could now know—thirty-three years after Jesus was born in the manger and dedicated at the temple, He would go to the cross and die. He'd be surrounded by soldiers with swords and lances; after His death, they'll pierce Him in the side to make sure He's dead—blood and water will flow from Him. Mary will see this; her soul will be pierced as

well. I'm sure as she stood at the foot of the cross with John the disciple by her side she thought of when she dedicated that little boy at the temple and remembered that old man holding Him and what he said to her. He was telling her she would watch this terrible act and a sword of pain and sorrow would pierce her own soul; she would understand that thirty-three years later.

For me, this Scripture is very emotional. I preach it today on the Sunday before Christmas because I don't want us to lose the meaning of what the manger is all about. It's the beginning of God's physical human plan to bring us salvation. God chose the hardest route to bring us forgiveness. Born in a cold barn, unsanitary conditions, living a life where He had one set of clothes—we know He lived a life that wasn't rich and he had no home. Yet Jesus Christ lived daily as the Lamb of God. Thirty-three years later He would die on the cross in an agonizing way to bring us life. Mary would have to wait those years to see this plan fulfilled; you and I will wait four months. Today as we thank God for the manger and cradle for the Christ Child, we'll bow our heads in four months because He will die on the cross for us. We know the plan much better than Mary could have—a Savior who came to die. A Savior born to die that we might have life. He went through the hardest of circumstances so you and I would have the comfort of sitting in a sanctuary to worship Him. How could we do less for Him than worship Him and surrender our lives to the one who came for us? Jesus came ultimately to lay down His life and rose again so we could have the opportunity of salvation. We worship the joy of the manger this December, but in a few months we'll weep at the cross. Don't let the Christmas holiday absorb what the true message of Christmas is. It is a joyous season—the Savior came for us but realize He came to die for us.

I pray this coming week you and I will celebrate the joy of Christmas but remember the manger bed had the cross looming over it. When Jesus was twelve years old at the temple talking to the great teachers of the law who were amazed at what He knew, the cross was looming over Him. There's no record of His life from that time to when he began His ministry but still the cross loomed over Him. He told His disciples I'm going to die but I will rise again.

If you don't know Him as your personal Savior, a warm rush comes over me as I speak these words of Jesus. I've just been given the privilege of speaking them. If you need a Savior, He's waiting for you. He came for you, went to the cross for you. He walked from a grave for you because He loves you and wants you as His son or daughter. He wants you to have life, hope, peace, eternity. He wants you but you have to want Him; you have to ask Him into your heart. In the last words in the Bible in Revelation "...whosoever will..."—Jesus will receive and accept as son or daughter. If you need Him today, simply say Lord Jesus I want a relationship with You. I want to open my heart and give that as the best and only gift. Come live in me, put Your spirit in me, walk with me every step.

Let Us Pray: Our Father, our God, thank You Lord for this passage today. It moves me how Simeon gave words that promised the world the salvation of God—not just a particular race, color, or nation, but all the world including Jew and Gentile alike. A Savior has come for us. Father, as we celebrate Christmas this week I pray we never lose sight of what Christmas is all about—Jesus came, born in a manger, and the peace You give to us in that. Help us to bear in mind He came in order to die. Mary wouldn't know that for thirty-three years, but we know it today. In four months we'll meet together and thank You that You gave Your life for us and that You rose from the grave for us. May we remember that Christmas is a time when You came to seek us out, to seek me out. If there's one here today and does not know you, I pray he or she will pray a simple prayer with me: Dear Lord, thank You that You love me. You love me so much You came for me. You died for me, rose from the grave for me that I might have forgiveness and eternal life as a son or daughter of God. In this Christmas season I give You the best gift I have—my heart. Take the throne and live in me that I'll have a personal relationship with Jesus, my Savior. Thank You Lord for loving and saving me. One person who prays that prayer in faith fulfills "...whosoever will..." Bless us in these moments, I pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.