

REVEALED IN SUFFERING

Luke 2:22-40

First Sunday after Christmas (Series C)

December 30, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Merry Christmas! Yes, it is still Christmas. In fact, counting today, we still have a week of Christmas left.

The Church celebrates Christmas a little bit differently than how the world does it. The world's Christmas begins sometime in November as people start putting up their lights, and we all do that one thing that really defines the world's Christmas: we shop. We buy lots of things, sometimes for other people, and sometimes just for ourselves. Then Christmas Day comes. We tear open our packages, eat a ham, play with our new Legos, and Christmas is over. Then people throw their Christmas trees thrown out by the curb. I'm a little tempted to take one of those Christmas trees and put it up in my house, because Christmas isn't over!

The Church does things much differently. While the world is out shopping—indulging in materialism—the Church is waiting through the season of Advent. Because for the Church, Christmas is not about *giving* gifts. It is about *receiving* just one gift: the Christ. And preparation to *receive* a gift is much different than preparation to *give* a gift.

If Christmas is about us giving lots of gifts, then we need a month or more to shop. But if Christmas is about the gift of a Savior *from God to us*, then we prepare by waiting and praying. That's the season of Advent.

Now there's nothing wrong with giving gifts. It's great. But the meaning of Christmas is not in the presents. It's not even in spending time with family. The meaning of Christmas is the gift of a Savior. So as the world ends Christmas with the giving of gifts, the Church begins Christmas with the gift of a Savior. And, just as that famous song about a partridge in a pear tree teaches us, we continue to celebrate this gift for twelve days. We behold this child who is "born the King of angels" ("O Come, All Ye Faithful").

So in the gospel lesson this morning we continue to behold the infant Jesus. He is forty days old now, and he goes with his family to the temple for Mary's purification sacrifice and to be presented to the Lord as all firstborn sons were.

The gospel lesson for the First Sunday after Christmas comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 22 through 40. It is on page 725 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 2, beginning at verse 22, we read in Jesus' name.

²² 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 ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came

in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation
³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

At Christmas God revealed himself as a child. He took on human flesh, but not the flesh of a grown up. He came into the world the same way we all do—as a baby. The eternal Son of God—the eternal Word through whom God spoke all things into existence—revealed himself as an infant. When you really think about it, this sounds kind of crazy. Here was this tiny little baby, who could not speak, could not walk, and could not take care of himself. But he was God. All the fullness of deity dwelt in this infant’s body (Col. 1:19; 2:9). This sounds impossible, but God, well, he does what he does, whether it’s possible or not. So God revealed himself as a baby, in total humility.

Instead of God revealing himself in power and glory, like we might expect, he revealed himself in weakness and poverty. He came in humility. And there’s one interesting detail in this text that illustrates the humility of Jesus’ birth. Without a little background in the Old Testament, we might miss it. It’s in verse twenty-four. It says Joseph and Mary came “to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons’” (2:24).

This has to do with Old Testament ceremonial law, and I think this is kind of interesting: After giving birth to a male child, mothers went through a purification process for forty days,

and at the end of forty days they brought a sacrifice. According to the instruction prescribed in Leviticus, they were supposed to bring “a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering” (Lev. 12:6). There were *two* sacrifices: one lamb and one bird—either a pigeon or a dove. This is what the Law prescribed. But not every family could afford a lamb, so the law made an exception. It said, “If she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons” (Lev. 12:8). And this is what Joseph and Mary did. Instead of sacrificing a lamb, they exercised the provision for poor people. They brought two birds.

So when we read about Mary’s purification, understanding this Old Testament law, we learn something about the family the Son of God was born into: they were poor. They could not afford the sacrifice of a lamb.

But why would the Son of God be born into a poor family? He could have been born into *any* family. But he wasn’t. God *chose* a poor family.

If we didn’t know the Christmas story, we might expect the Son of God to come to a *rich* family—to be born in a palace and wrapped in purple cloths to indicate his royalty. But the Son of God came to a family that could not even afford a lamb.

But when you think about it, this is really quite appropriate, because this child is *himself* the Lamb of God. He comes to those who cannot pay for their own sins. He comes to pay the price *for* them. Joseph and Mary could not afford a lamb for the sacrifice, but despite their poverty, when you stop and think about it, they did actually bring a lamb to the temple. They brought Jesus—“the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). This is more than just “good enough.” This is the Lamb all those other lambs looked forward to. They carried the sacrifice for *all* sin—Jesus Christ—and presented him at the temple.

This is what the prophet Malachi had spoken. Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, spoke the word of the Lord 430 years before the birth of Jesus: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple” (Mal. 3:1). John the Baptist fulfilled the part about the messenger. But here we see how Jesus fulfilled the part about the *Lord* coming to his temple.

I wonder if Malachi ever considered that the fulfillment of his prophecy would look like this—an ordinary looking baby being presented at the temple when his mother goes to offer the poor woman’s sacrifice for her purification.

A baby! Human imagination conceives of a grand parade with pomp and circumstance. Power and glory. But, no. God shows up in his temple as a baby. It just looks like an ordinary, low-income Jewish family coming for a common religious ritual. It happened all the time. Nothing special to see here.

But there was one man there who recognized what was going on—a guy by the name of Simeon. It doesn’t even say he was a priest. He was just a righteous and devout man who was waiting for the consolation of Israel (2:25). Luke says, “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (2:26).

And the Holy Spirit led him to the temple at the same time Joseph and Mary were bringing Jesus. And when Simeon saw Jesus—this forty-day-old baby, born into a low-income family—he knew that he was seeing the Christ. So Simeon blessed God, saying,

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel” (2:29-32).

This is a marvelous and beautiful prayer.

Okay, Lord. You promised me that I would see the Messiah. Here he is. Now I can die peacefully, knowing that Israel is receiving her redemption, and not only Israel, but the whole world.

Beautiful. So Joseph and Mary marveled at what they heard. Here in this tiny baby, Simeon saw the Lord’s salvation with his very own eyes. Already, this child was salvation, sent from on high, to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

God had revealed salvation in a *baby*. God had revealed *himself* as a baby. God had humbled himself to this lowly form. Again, this sounds kind of crazy.

But if you think *this* is crazy, just wait for what Simeon says next.

If you find it marvelous that God revealed himself in humility, just wait until he reveals himself in *suffering*. Just wait until the poverty gives way to condemnation.

Simeon’s words find a somber note when he turns to Mary and says, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” (2:34-35).

What in the world is Simeon talking about now? Whatever it is, it doesn’t sound very good. Or if it is good, it doesn’t sound entirely pleasant. “A sign that is opposed ... A sword will pierce your soul.”

He tells Mary that this child will bring her pain. It will be like a sword that cuts deep into her soul. Part of what Simeon is talking about is the crucifixion. Mary will stand and watch as her son is lifted up on a cross like a criminal, and she will watch him die. This must have been the most painful moment of Mary’s life.

But Simeon is also talking about Jesus’ life and teaching. He says this sword will reveal thoughts from many hearts (2:35), and people will be opposed to him (2:34).

In addition to being the Son of God and the Messiah, Jesus is also a prophet. And like every other prophet, he will be opposed. He speaks the Word of God, and the Word of God is not always easy to hear. The letter to the Hebrews teaches that “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:13).

So as Jesus—the eternal Word of God—comes teaching the Word of God, he will reveal the thoughts and intentions of every man’s heart. And most people are not going to appreciate this. Jesus had a knack for offending and dividing people. He still does. I always find it kind of funny when people who aren’t Christians say they still have a lot of respect for Jesus, but then they go on to describe a Jesus who isn’t really consistent with the one in the gospels. They seem to like the Jesus who teaches us to love one another and who hangs out with sinners. But the Jesus

who says, “Go and sin no more” (John 8:11), or who calls his friends “Satan” (Matt. 16:23), or who flips over tables in the temple (John 2:15), or who calls us to take up our crosses too (9:23), this Jesus isn’t quite as popular.

People didn’t always appreciate what Jesus had to say. You wouldn’t either. This is going to be a painful experience for everyone, especially Mary. People are going to hate her Son. And he will say some things that bother her (e.g., 8:19-21). And because of these things he will say, she will have to watch him die.

The teachings of Jesus are not going to be easy for anyone to accept. Some people will, but others will oppose him. And those who oppose him are going to get their way. The opponents are going to want Jesus dead, and they are going to get their way.

So Simeon is here to remind Mary—and also us—where this is all going. The Christ child might look pretty cute at forty days old. But he’s not going to look so cute in about thirty years or so when he does what he is here to do.

The opponents are going to get their way. But do not be distressed when this happens, for this is God’s way too. Everything that happens to this child will be what God intends. This is going to end exactly how God planned it. That is what Simeon teaches us. But that doesn’t mean everything will be easy.

In fact, it will be the exact opposite of easy. This child came to bring us joy, but joy is not the same thing as happiness, because the joy of salvation comes through the death of the Christ.

Simeon reminds us that this child came to deal with sin. And dealing with our sin is no small task. The really offensive thing about Jesus is that he reveals just how bad our sin is. He will reveal that the problem is not merely our actions, but, even more so, our hearts (Matt 15:19). And it’s not a problem that can be fixed by Jesus simply saying, “Hey! Knock it off!” He’s going to have to go to the cross for this. He is going to have to suffer as a condemned criminal. He is going to have to be forsaken by God the Father. If there was any other way, Jesus would have done that. He wouldn’t have gone through with the cross, especially with the rejection by the Father, unless it was absolutely necessary.

One of the things we see from this is just how serious our sin is. I don’t know if Mary understood the full import of what her son was doing as he hung there, but if she did, she would have recognized that he was hanging there on account of her sin. This would have been the most severe pain. But it also would have been the most incomprehensible joy, because this sacrifice meant her salvation, and not only hers, but also the salvation of the entire world.

A God with wrath might offend us and scare us. But at the cross, that is exactly what we see, a God with wrath. But there is more to it than that. God is also the one who endures that wrath for our sake.

He came to do a dirty job. He is going to get dirty. He is going to get bloody. His soul is going to get stained with your sin.

“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel” (2:34). He will be a stumbling block. He will cause many to fall, but all who believe in him, he will cause to rise, because this child himself will fall and rise. This is why he came.

At Christmas God comes in weakness. He is revealed in humility. But if you think that is crazy, just wait. Because this God is also going to be revealed in suffering. Amen.

REVEALED IN SUFFERING (Luke 2:22-40)

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.