

## A SIGN AND A SWORD

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
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Galatians 4:4-7  
Luke 2:22-40

Have you noticed that we're not allowed to linger long at the manger? We heard, during the Sundays of Advent, the prophets speak of darkness, of sin, of desire, and need, the pain of exile and homelessness. And then, in the middle of a starlit night in Bethlehem, there was a baby's cry. Light shone from the stable behind the inn. The heavens split open in songs of angelic joy. There was music such as had never been heard. Messengers spoke of "glad tidings," and wise men came to worship. Joy to the world! Promises fulfilled, pledges made good, deliverance, salvation, liberation. Joy!

You would think we would pause there for a while.

But Christmas is only two days old and already the music is winding down. We've straightened up under the tree and put away the tattered ribbons and wrapping paper. There will be leftovers for lunch today. The relatives from the east, bearing gifts, have returned home. And in a couple of days January will arrive, bringing bills to pay and the coldest days of winter. Christmas carol sentimentality comes up against the hard realities of daily living.

So, too, in the biblical account, the incandescence of the nativity is short-lived. "The hopes and fears of all the years" may have been met in Bethlehem that night, but the story of Jesus has only just begun. Luke's gospel moves briskly on from the stable in Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem and then to the carpenter's shop in Nazareth, where Jesus will grow up.

Generally speaking, the tradition of the church is remarkably uninterested in Jesus' childhood. Only Luke and Matthew out of the four gospels give us any information about Jesus' actual birth; and Luke, in just 32 verses, adds the only, scanty details about incidents in Jesus' childhood. About Jesus' first twelve years, his "hidden years" as scholars call them, we know only—as Luke puts it—that Jesus "grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him" (v. 40). There's a bris and two brief visits to the Temple. That's it.

Still, what Luke does tell us in these brief stories of Jesus' childhood is significant. He reminds us that Jesus was a Jew, raised up in a family that meticulously observed the law of Moses. Mary and Joseph did everything the law required. Their son was circumcised on the eighth day. Mary underwent ritual purification forty days after giving birth, sacrificing two pigeons or doves as commanded. And they consecrated (or "presented") this first-born son, Jesus, to the Lord, as pious Jews had done from the time of the Exodus, when God spared the lives of the Israelite firstborn while slaying the firstborn of the Egyptians. In all these details, Luke makes the case that in Jesus, there is continuity between the Old Testament and the New, between synagogue and church. The

temple—center of Israel’s liturgical life and also of its hopes and affections—will continue to play a central role throughout Luke’s gospel and in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles.

At the temple, Mary and Joseph—and all of us listening in—receive two testimonies to who this child Jesus really is. The first is offered by Simeon, a devout old man filled with the Holy Spirit and assured by the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he sees God’s Messiah. The Holy Spirit leads him to the temple at the very hour when Jesus is being presented. And so we have an old man now ready to die holding a six-week-old baby who is, at long last, “the consolation of Israel.” The consolation of Israel. It refers to the messianic age foretold by the prophets. Simeon sings about it in phrases drawn heavily from Second Isaiah. Through Simeon, the Holy Spirit declares that Jesus is to be the means of salvation for *all* people, Jews *and* non-Jews alike. Good news of great joy, indeed!

Yet Luke also introduces through Simeon a more somber note. Israel’s consolation and the salvation of the Gentiles will not be without great cost. Jesus will bring the truth to light, and in doing so, he will throw all who come into contact with him into a crisis of decision. In that decision, rising and falling, life and death, result. He will be a sign—remember how the angels told the shepherds: “this will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger”<sup>1</sup>—the babe is a sign, but one that many will oppose.

And still today, Jesus precipitates the centrally important movement of one’s life—toward or away from God. As much we may wish to join the name of Jesus only to the positive, satisfying and blessed in life, the inescapable fact is that anyone who turns on light creates shadows. Who can doubt in these troubled times that the Christ enters into a world all too ready to reject him, to deny him, to betray him, to crucify him? “Peace on earth,” the angels sing, yet precisely because God wills peace—*shalom*—for all the earth, God forever opposes all that would deny it: sin, evil, ignorance, prejudice, disease, death itself. Our resurrection faith confesses that God’s life-giving love will triumph over every enemy of God’s peace, but we should not romanticize that cosmic battle or trivialize the cost of such amazing grace.

Luke knows what Jesus himself said about peace: “Do you think I have come to bring peace on earth? No, rather division.”<sup>2</sup> Or as Matthew’s version has it: “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”<sup>3</sup> It’s a selective sword, a sword of judgment, destroying some and sparing others, a sword for discrimination and not merely for punishment. For some will hear the word of God and do it, and others will not.<sup>4</sup> It’s a sword, Simeon tells Mary, that “will pierce your own soul too.”<sup>5</sup> Mary and her son will pay a high price for his saving work. When Jesus returns to Jerusalem as an adult, the cross will await; and the mother will bury her child.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:12.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:51.

<sup>3</sup> Mt. 10:34.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 8:19-21.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 2:35.

The truth of Simeon's prophetic witness is confirmed by Anna, a devout prophetess of advanced age. She has spent her days at the temple in constant prayer and fasting, signs of deep contrition and mourning. Why is she fasting? Because she is in grief over the pain of her people. Yet at the moment she sees the newborn child, she begins to praise God. Anna too comes to the scene precisely when and where Jesus is being presented. She thanks God and witnesses about the child to all who have kept alive hope for "the redemption of Jerusalem." Jerusalem and with it the temple represent the whole of Israel's hope before God. And Jesus will return to Jerusalem because, as these two have testified, God is leading Israel to the Messiah, just as God is giving the Messiah to Israel.

New Testament scholar Fred Craddock points out that these two aged saints are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises. And they are old, ready to move offstage, to "depart in peace." God is doing something new, but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God's keeping of an old promise. As the risen Christ was later to say to his disciples, "Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled."<sup>6</sup>

Anna and Simeon are a portrait of the Israel that accepted Jesus. Not all did, of course, any more than did—or do—all of us Gentiles. And what are we to make of that?

We are, all of us, challenged by living in a world where it is completely plausible to argue that God—if she exists—is malevolent, disinterested or dead. The world has not become better since the beginning of the Christian era, let alone since the days of Hosea and Jeremiah. Large parts of humankind are suffering just as they did two thousand years ago. The prophetic visions of doom are arguably more realistic today than they were when Quirinius was governor of Syria. In some parts of the world all children "from two years old and under" have died and are dying, not by an order of Herod, but by the unchecked spread of preventable disease and the ever-increasing cruelty of war and its results. And it's not just "out there," among the principalities and powers. Each of us confronts within ourselves the unhealed and unsaved terrain of our own lives—still so vast after the message of healing and salvation has been heard at every Christmas for over two thousand years.

To all this sober "reality," those of us who follow the Christ say with Simeon: "Our eyes have seen His salvation." And we feel blessed, according to the words of Jesus, because we have seen the presence of this saving power within the world and history.

Simeon and Anna, a once joyless couple, have caught sight of the Christ child and are now filled with joy. While not denying the battles still to be fought in the name of God's anointed, they assure us that something has indeed happened, something has been born among us that not only will, but already has altered the course of history. It is God's strange project for re-creating the world. It is a project to be celebrated when lives are transformed and those transformed lives go to work transforming the world along the lines of Jesus' priorities. His coming is celebrated when the hungry are fed, the naked

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 24:44.

clothed and the homeless sheltered—when the structures of society that oppress some and exclude others and deny justice to many are, in his name, confronted and changed.

Something has happened, and something has begun. Simeon and Anna invite us to look and see. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of a real revolution. The time for rejoicing is now.

Glory to God in the highest and peace to God's people on earth! Amen.