

Sermon for the First Sunday after Christmas

“Now That He’s Come...”

Luke 2:22-40

12/30/18c

Every December at year’s end we get to celebrate Christmas. We get to remember and rehearse that great event when God sent to the world His only Son, and to rejoice in God’s gift. During the Christmas *season* (the twelve days in which we find ourselves right now), and into the next seasons of the Church Year, Epiphany and Lent, we then *also* get to spend time observing what *happened* when God’s Son lived here in this world, and we get to spend important time *reflecting upon* this and, like Mary, *pondering* it in our hearts.

We often do rather poorly at this part. The celebration of Christmas is easy. The further reflection, thoughtful study, and prayerful pondering is not. Part of the reason it’s not easy is that in pondering Jesus’ life we bump up against the surprising and unsettling reality that Jesus, when He came into our world, though He should have been loved, was widely hated—a fact which is still true today.

You know, on Christmas Eve I said that “this world will *never* be the same again, since this Child has come”.

And that’s true. But that doesn’t mean that the world is now peaceful and perfect; it’s not. And why isn’t the world peaceful and perfect, when the Prince of Peace has come? Because many, so many, reject God’s Word; they reject Christ, who was sent to save them.

Simeon warned it would be this way.

We met Simeon in this morning’s Holy Gospel, which comes from the same chapter of Luke as the Christmas story. The events take place just forty days after Jesus’ birth. Now the location has moved to Jerusalem and God’s temple, and Simeon, who has been waiting long and

patiently, trusting in a divine promise, finally gets to see his salvation. Led by the Spirit, Simeon takes Baby Jesus out of His mother's arms, and as he embraces the Infant, Simeon chants those words we know so well, for we chant them too after embracing our Savior in His blessed Supper.

Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace, according to Your word (Luke 2:29).

That "word" was a promise specially given to Simeon by the Holy Spirit that Simeon would get to live to see the coming of the Messiah. Now, here He was, the Christ. Sent to redeem Israel. Sent to change the world.

But less well-known to us probably are Simeon's subsequent words, addressed not to God but to Mary:

Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed (vv. 34-35).

What was Simeon saying there? He was saying that Baby Jesus would grow up to be a figure of sharp division in the land. It was "destined" to happen. On one hand, many in Israel would fall because of Jesus (and this doesn't mean stumbling upon your feet). On the other hand, many in Israel would rise, repenting and receiving righteousness and salvation by faith. Jesus, Simeon prophesied, would earn a bad reputation (He would be "spoken against"). But His bad reputation would be entirely unfounded. It would be inflicted by people essentially trying to protect and defend themselves, shall we say "justify" themselves, against the penetrating word of truth that Jesus would bring: For Jesus would not keep things on a safe, surface level; He would reveal the real thoughts of man. Jesus, God incarnate, sent to save...His words would cut to the heart of things, uncovering the sin of the people. And all this would lead

to anguish when His haters would reject and condemn this Man: Simeon's words anticipate the cross when he says to Jesus' mother, "Mary, a sword will pierce through your own soul also".

Jesus...God's great gift to the world...But, sad to say, God's gift was thrown back in His face.

Now, be assured, believers, none of this detracts in any way from the very real joy that has come into the world—that has come from God to *you*—in Jesus. The poor and contrite spirit finds His redemption nigh—in *Jesus*—still today (see *LSB* #820, "My Soul, Now Praise Your Maker" st. 2). Your Christmas joy this year can and should be full, rich, and real. And yet, it is there, this surprising rejection of the Savior, and it must be talked about.

As long as everything is warmth and smiles and sweetness and singing, only one side of the story of Christmas is told. Just think of raging and murderous King Herod. Jesus was a great gift, but He was also a rejected gift.

What did you and your family do last Wednesday, the 26th? Enjoy delicious leftovers? Assemble and then play with your new toys? Anyone think on St. Stephen? As you may know, the Church remembers St. Stephen on the day after Christmas. St. Stephen is called the first Christian martyr. After Jesus' resurrection, in the early days of the Church, righteous Stephen made enemies, and those enemies seized Stephen and brought him before the Jewish authorities. This brave and faithful man, in answering the unjust charges they leveled against him, took the opportunity to call the people to repentance. Like Jesus, whom he served, Stephen revealed the thoughts of their hearts. This might have led to their salvation, except that they resisted the Holy Spirit. They closed their ears, picked up rocks, and hurled them at Stephen, and didn't stop until he was dead. Sounds a lot like the division and turmoil that Simeon predicted surrounding Jesus in our text.

But I want to ask you, Do you recall what Stephen said before he died? Amazingly, Stephen prayed for his enemies. “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60).

I bring this up because Stephen’s conduct and his words, especially Stephen’s merciful heart toward his killers, it absolutely floors me every time I read it. I ask myself, Am *I* like that? Do *I* hold pity in my heart toward those who are falling at the message of Jesus—falling to their eternal doom? Do *I*, like Stephen, value God’s gift of eternal life more than *this* life, so that I could willingly lay down my life in witness to my Lord Jesus?

The death of Stephen, commemorated on the day after Christmas, is certainly a sobering reminder that many reject God’s gift of salvation. The death of Stephen, even more importantly, shows believers in Jesus what is possible not by our feeble might, but by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, as we offer our witness to Christ in this world.

Thinking of Stephen and pondering what he said and did, it astounds me, it humbles me; it really empties me. In a way, it reveals the thoughts of my heart. And all this is good for me. Even though I see how frail my faith, how lukewarm my love, how shallow my devotion to Jesus is, yet I do not despair, but repent. All of this only serves to remind me how completely I must rely on God’s grace and how desperately I need divine *salvation*.

It is the same for you, Christians! As I boldly told a woman in the hospital recently, “You need a Savior.” I added: “And you have a Savior—Jesus Christ.”

Just remember, fellow Christians, you are not that different from St. Stephen. As he was being stoned, the Bible says that Stephen, “full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (v.55). Like Stephen, you can see into heaven—that it is open *for you*! For your gracious Savior Jesus has

atoned for your every sin just as He did for Stephen. In Baptism God has fully cleansed you, robing you with Christ's perfect righteousness; like Stephen, the Holy Spirit has filled your heart. With Spirit-given faith in Jesus you are fit for heaven even now. By faith you see God's glory in heaven, for your faith sees Jesus standing there, who died for Stephen and for you, and now lives.

Fellow Christians, we are not that different from another faithful witness of Christ, Simeon. Simeon, as he held Baby Jesus, cried out to God, "Lord, now You are letting Your servant go in peace...for my eyes have seen Your salvation" (Luke 2:30). Simeon was prepared to die, not because he had lived a perfect life, not because he had never faltered or fallen flat, not because he had always been strong, self-controlled, pious, or obedient, and not because his good works somehow outweighed his bad. No, Simeon was prepared to die because Jesus was here to save him from his sins. God had kept His Word to Simeon, His promise—and to Israel. And like Simeon, we have seen God's salvation. This did not happen for us with our eyes, but with our ears, through the Word. Over and over again we have heard and continue to hear that the Lord was crucified to make us holy and pure children of God. We are justified, God promises us, not by any works of our own but by faith, when we believe such a promise. The Lord's Supper of Jesus' body and blood strengthens our faith in such a divine promise. And believing, we are ready, like Simeon was, to "depart in peace."

Luke 2, this great Christmas chapter, has been quite full of what we might call witnesses...even "evangelists": with the angels beginning things off, but then with so many human witnesses: the shepherds; Simeon; also faithful Anna, who took what she'd heard from Simeon and ran with it to tell others. We've also talked today about the first Christian martyr, Stephen. All witnesses, all evangelists. But they are not the only ones.

This new year 2019 I have decided to use my monthly newsletter articles to think together with you about evangelism and our call to be witnesses

of Christ and God's great salvation. I am confident that God will bless us as we prayerfully reflect on this happy task. Yes, and I am sure that it must be a happy task for us, to serve as Christ's witnesses.

How can it be anything but, since evangelism is all about our Savior, Jesus?

Merry Christmas to God's people, to you all. Together we can be very happy this Christmas season, as we remember how our lives have been changed forever by Jesus, and by the power of the Holy Spirit working faith. Yes, the world is not the same, now that salvation has come in Jesus Christ. Even though it remains true that many fall at the Gospel of Jesus, we and all believers, chosen by God's grace, shall rise. God Himself raises us up to enjoy the most wonderful peace that comes in Jesus' name. *As the angel told Joseph, "You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).*

Jesus *is* the Savior. Jesus *has* worked salvation, and your sins *are* forgiven. God, who kept His Word to Simeon, *has kept all His promises to us*. The miracle of God's grace is that salvation through faith in Jesus is offered freely to all people. It is offered to people just like us.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.

Theme: The coming at Christmas of God's Son, Jesus Christ, sent into our flesh to redeem sinners, does not result in peace and joy for every member of mankind, for the reason that the thoughts of many are stubbornly set against the Savior, Jesus, and His message of truth. Yet you may know this day that Jesus is surely God's gift bringing salvation to you and to all who believe in Him—a promise and pledge to penitent sinners that (like God the Holy Spirit's promise to Simeon) is God's own Word, and is true. Here in this God's holy house, through Word and Sacrament God the Holy Spirit bestows such a gracious promise upon you and also fulfills it.

Goal: That the hearers look at the Bible's message about Jesus realistically, welcoming what

God intends in the sending of His Son, even their salvation; that the hearers meanwhile reckon soberly with the reality that many, to their eternal doom, will reject the message that Jesus and His Church bring; that, despite all opponents and objectors, the hearers in true faith will enjoy the God-given peace that Simeon knew; and that the hearers will live lives full of joy through faith in Jesus who has come, witnessing by their loving ways to the God who wants to have mercy on *all*.