

“Seeing the Salvation,” Luke 2:21-40 (Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 23, 2018)

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

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, worshipping 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.

PRAY

Today is the Fourth Sunday of Advent, the last Sunday before Christmas, and we are continuing our study of the gospel of Luke. We’re in chapter two, specifically the account of Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem.

It’s forty days after the birth of Jesus. We know that because we read in verse 22 about the “time of purification according to the Law of Moses.” In Leviticus 12 we’re told that a woman who gives birth to a boy is unclean for purposes of worship for forty days, but then may go to the temple and offer sacrifices.

While at the temple, Joseph and Mary encounter Simeon and Anna. These two are overjoyed to see the baby Jesus.

But their joy is not mere sentiment. Rather, their eyes have been opened by God in a rare way, really in a unique way. They both see that Jesus is no ordinary baby. They see three things in particular about Jesus, and I'll put this as bluntly as I can possibly put this: if you don't see these three things about Jesus, if when I finish explaining these three things you don't say, "That's right - I see that about Jesus, too," then you don't really understand what Christmas is all about. Simeon and Anna weren't just overjoyed because they saw a baby, as wonderful as babies are. They were overjoyed because they saw that in the baby Jesus: first, a sign that is opposed. Second, someone who will cause the falling and rising of many. Third, the redemption of Israel.

First, Jesus is a sign that is opposed. Simeon, we read, was a righteous and devout man. That means that he was blameless in his relationships with other people; no one could speak a word against him. It means he had a profound love for the Lord.

He wasn't a priest. In fact, he wasn't anyone of consequence in Israel. He's almost always depicted in paintings as an old man, but there's nothing in the text that requires us to believe he's an old man. He does say he's ready to die in verse 29, but you don't have to be elderly to say to the Lord, "It's ok for me to go now and be with you in heaven."

Why did he say that? What happened? The Holy Spirit prompted Simeon on that day to go to the temple. While he was at the temple the Spirit led Simeon to a specific family, and to a specific child. And somehow the Holy Spirit made it clear to Simeon that this child was Israel's Christ. So he could say, "Lord, I'm ready now. I see that the promised deliverer is here. Your servant Simeon can happily die and go to be with you. I've seen the Christ."

That word "Christ" is familiar to a lot of us. We're accustomed to hear about "Jesus Christ," but though we've heard the word many of us don't what "Christ" means. "Christ" is not Jesus' last name. If you met Jesus, you wouldn't say, "Hello, Mr. Christ."

A better translation might be Jesus the Christ, because "Christ" in the Bible is a title. It was a familiar word to Simeon, and Mary, and Joseph. It means "the anointed one of God."

Like Simeon, many in Israel had been waiting for the Christ. They did not know the exact time and place the way Simeon did, but they could read about the Christ in the Hebrew Scriptures. They could count down the 490 years prophesied in Daniel 9 and they knew the time was near.

They had specific expectations of the Christ. He would be a powerful man, a man with supernatural abilities perhaps, who would lead the Jewish people in revolt against their oppressors, drive the dirty Roman overlords out of Israel, and re-establish the Davidic monarchy. He would restore Israel to the power and glory she knew during the days of King Solomon, when riches poured into Jerusalem and kings and queens the world over sought his wisdom.

But as Jesus grew older and began preaching and performing miracles, and people began to whisper, “Could he be the Christ?” Jesus began to claim much more for himself than that he was anointed by God. *He claimed to be God himself.*

In the gospel of John we read over and over again how Jesus allowed himself to be worshiped. In John 9, Jesus received the worship of the man born blind after Jesus healed him. Jesus didn’t correct him and say, “Oh, you must not worship me, that’s sacrilege.” No, Jesus accepted worship. In John 20, when after doubting the resurrection Thomas sees Jesus and puts his fingers in the holes in Jesus’ hands and places his whole hand in Jesus’ side and cries out, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus doesn’t say, “Thomas, you shouldn’t say such things. I’m the Christ, but I’m not God.” No, Jesus accepts Thomas’ worship.

In Mark 2, we read the account of the paralyzed man. Jesus is preaching in a house, and the friends of the paralyzed man can’t get him to Jesus because of the crowd. So they cut a hole in the roof and lowered him down right in front of Jesus in the hope that Jesus would heal him. The first words out of Jesus’ mouth are, “Son, your sins are forgiven.” We read in verse 7 that some of the religious leaders, who were there listening to Jesus teach, thought to themselves, “Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” Mark 2:7. And the answer of course is, “No one. Only God can forgive sins.” They got it. They knew what Jesus was claiming by forgiving the paralytic’s sins.

The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day (the Pharisees, for example) were perfectly fine with a Christ who had great wisdom, who had awesome leadership skills, and who could even work miracles, but they drew the line at the Christ claiming to be God himself. When the Pharisees heard Jesus’ claim of divinity, they hated him and eventually they conspired with the rest of the aristocracy to have him killed. **He was, as Simeon prophesied in verse 34, the “sign that is opposed.”**

We are in the church accustomed to thinking of the Pharisees as the bad guys. They’re awful - they were opposed to Jesus. And they were dead wrong to oppose Jesus. But the longer I go in the ministry and the longer I live as a Christian the more I admire the Pharisees. You know why? *At least they had the courage of their convictions. At least they were willing to act on what they believed.* They knew that Jesus’ claim to be God demanded one of two responses: **worship me or crucify me.** But there was no in between. The Pharisees chose wrong, but at least they chose!

What do we do in Oxford? Just about everyone you meet in our town will say they believe Jesus is God and worship him as such. But do we? What’s the ultimate test of worship? Where does the rubber meet the road? In obedience!

We gladly say we worship Jesus but we don’t obey him. I mean have you looked at the commandments? They go way beyond do not murder and do not commit adultery. You can at least claim you keep those. But what about these other ones? Always give to the poor in secret. Never take revenge. Always be kind. Always show hospitality. Consider one another better than yourself. Give away money cheerfully. Don’t be anxious. Don’t judge another Christian over a matter of conscience. Always forgive. And above all always *love one another.*

To the extent we glibly say, “I believe Jesus is God” yet continually ignore and refuse to wrestle with these commandments, friends, we don’t choose. We refuse to worship Jesus *and* we refuse to oppose Jesus. And Jesus can’t bear that. He said to the Laodicean church: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! ¹⁶ So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.” Revelation 3:15-16.

Wherever Jesus says, “I am the Lord,” the only way to respond with integrity is to either rend our garments and rend our hearts over how we don’t obey Jesus, or take up the cry, “Crucify him!” But being lukewarm about Jesus is not an option, because he is a sign that is opposed.

Second, Christmas means Jesus will cause the falling and rising of many. That’s also from verse 34, and we’ll read the whole verse now. “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 ...’” Luke 2:34.

For a long time I read that verse as saying the same thing as what we talked about in point one. Jesus, when he came to adulthood, would separate the wheat from the chaff in Israel, and would cause some Israelites to fall and others to rise based on whether or not they accepted Jesus as God.

I no longer think that’s the best way to read verse 34, for two reasons. If that’s what Simeon meant, he wouldn’t have said to Mary, “This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel.” He would have said, “This child is appointed for the fall and rising of *all* in Israel” because, again, those are the only two acceptable responses to God - obey him or oppose him. Nor would he have said, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, *and* for a sign that is opposed,” because he would have merely been repeating himself if he meant it that way.

No, I think it means something else. Simeon is not only prophesying that you must come to Jesus as God. He’s also prophesying what will happen to you when you come to Jesus as God.

Simeon means this: “When people in Israel see that Jesus is the Christ and that the Christ is God himself, you’ll know it because they will first *fall*.” Another way to translate that Greek word is “ruin.” In other words, you come to Jesus Christ, he will ruin your life.

If you claim this morning to be a Christian, I wonder: has Jesus done that to you? Has he ruined your life? If he hasn’t I’m not sure you’ve really met him at all.

In the Bible, Jesus ruined Peter’s life before Peter really knew who Jesus was. Peter, impetuous, outspoken Peter, had to deny Jesus three times and face the humiliation of that failure before he could come to the Christ as God. Jesus ruined Paul’s life. Paul was advancing in Judaism far beyond anyone his age, he was zealous for the law and a Pharisee of Pharisees. In fact, he was so zealous for the law that he persecuted the church and killed its members. But then he met Jesus on the Damascus Road, and he realized he had to lose it all to come to the Christ as God.

Fast forward to the present day: Rosaria Butterfield was a tenured professor of English literature at a major research university and, by her own account, living a happy and fulfilled life as a lesbian in a committed relationship. But slowly over the course of a couple of years she was introduced to Jesus and became convinced he is God. She became convinced she owed Jesus her worship. At one point she says, “I did not want to become a Christian. I did not go looking for Jesus. But he found me. And the only words I can find to describe my conversion is that was a train wreck. It was traumatic to meet the real Jesus. I didn’t want to lose everything I loved, but once I saw who Jesus truly is I to choose him over everything else.”

You say, “Well, J.D., I’m not a Peter, Paul, or a Mary, or a Rosaria. I haven’t had this dramatic conversion experience nor have I publicly denied Jesus as the Christ.” Neither have I.

But still. If you claim to be a Christian, has Jesus ruined you? Has he ruined every pretense that you’ve ever had of your own righteousness? Has he completely destroyed the idea that you are a good person and fundamentally better than some or all the people around you? Has he demolished every dream you’ve ever had that earthly success of any kind will satisfy your heart?

Above all, has Jesus forced you to see that your biggest problem is not what anyone else is doing to you or not doing for you, but that your biggest problem is yourself? Has he ruined the convenient narrative you’ve set up for yourself that everyone around you is letting you down and instead opened your eyes to the truth that your biggest problem is your own sin?

Jesus does not seek to ruin your life because he hates you and wants you miserable. Rather, he does it because he loves you. He wants to break the spell sin has cast over you so that you will forsake it and run to him as your only hope.

But Simeon doesn’t only say, “This child is appointed for the fall of many in Israel.” He says, “This child is appointed for the fall *and rising* of many in Israel.” That gets us to our last point.

Third, Christmas means that Jesus is the redemption of Israel. This gets us to Anna. Anna, unlike Simeon, was certainly old. She was either eighty-four years old or she had been a widow for eighty-four years. You can read the Greek either way and most scholars read it the former way, as to read it the other would make her more than one hundred years old - possible, but less likely.

Anna never left the temple - she worshiped there day and night. Perhaps the priests gave her a little room in the temple complex because she was so devoted to the Lord. We read this about Anna in verse 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.”

As I said earlier all the people in Jerusalem were waiting for the Christ, because they believed he would redeem the Jews. They believed he would purchase them out of their slavery to their enemies, the Romans, and restore the glory Israel had during the reigns of David and Solomon.

But when Jesus came as the Christ he came to redeem Israel from a greater enemy than Rome. He came to redeem his people from sin and death itself.

When Jesus died on the cross, because he had no sin of his own, he did not deserve to die. When you and I die, we're dying for our own sins. We deserve it. But Jesus' death, unlike ours, could actually accomplish something for other people.

When the sinless Christ died, he changed the power structure of the universe. Prior to the cross, sin and death reigned in the world. They were masters of the universe. No one could slip their chains. Jesus himself called the devil "the prince of this world."

But Jesus in his death broke the power of sin and death over the world. Put another way, he paid a ransom on the cross to free us from our slavery to them. He redeemed us. And when we come to the Christ as God we find they don't control us anymore. We can live differently.

Luke 2:25 says, "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." Almost all the commentators believe Simeon, in waiting for the consolation of Israel, was focused on the first few verses of Isaiah 40, where we read, "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins." Isaiah 40:1-2.

Friends, if you fall before Jesus as God then he will raise you up and then *he will comfort you*. He will speak tenderly to you through his Word and assure you that because your sins have been paid double by Jesus Christ, all you will ever receive from God from now on through eternity is his blessing. Christmas means that God loves you, is for you, has set you free and means to prosper you. And you can believe it's true because on the cross Jesus redeemed you from your greatest enemies.

Do you see that Jesus is the redemption of Israel? If you ask, "J.D., I'm not a part of Israel, am I?" Oh, yes you are. 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." Luke 2:29-32.

If you believe that Jesus is the Christ then no matter your ethnicity you are a spiritual Israelite. There are a lot of people today saying we in the church need to unhitch ourselves from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Hogwash - you know why? The Hebrew Scriptures contain the stories of our spiritual ancestors. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Samuel, David, and all the prophets belong to us. Their stories are our stories, because even though we may not be ethnic Jews we are the Israel of God.

But do you see that Jesus is our redemption? Then Simeon's prayer can be your prayer. He said, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace." When you see Jesus for who he is - God in the flesh, the one who causes you to fall but then redeems you and raises you up, you can say, "OK, God, I'm ready. I'm ready for you to take me home if it's my time. If not, I'm ready for whatever life throws at me because I know you are in control. The Christ has paid my

ransom. I'm ready because I know that in all things I can trust you, because you are good and you are for me. Lord, now you are letting your servant live in peace." Do you see that? I pray you do. That's the meaning of Christmas. AMEN