



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 2:22—38
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The Bad News About Jesus

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Charles Swindoll has written a rather telling poem about what many feel on the day after Christmas:

*'Twas the day after Christmas,
When all through the place
There were arguments and depression—
Even Mom had a long face.*

*The stockings hung empty,
And the house was a mess;
The new clothes didn't fit...
And Dad was under stress.*

*The family was irritable,
And the children—no one could please;
Because the instructions for the swing set
Were written in Chinese!*

*The bells no longer jingled,
And no carolers came around;
The sink was stacked with dishes,
And the tree was turning brown.*

*The stores were full of people
Returning things that fizzled and failed,
And the shoppers were discouraged
Because everything they'd bought
Was now on half-price sale!*

*'Twas the day AFTER Christmas—
The spirit of joy had disappeared;
The only hope on the horizon
Was twelve bowl games
On the first day of the New Year!*

That sort of says it all, doesn't it? There is something about the day *after* Christmas that can be a little bit disappointing. Maybe some part of it just didn't meet our expectations. Maybe we just don't want it to be over. Maybe the new year is frightening to us, especially if we spent more than we should have. I wonder if Mary and Joseph felt that way. We don't always think a lot about what happened the days after that wondrous night in the stable. We know that they stayed in Bethlehem. We know that because the gospel writer, Luke, tells us that eight days after Jesus was born, they had him circumcised, according to Jewish custom. But Luke tells us even more. He tells us about something that took

place 40 days after Jesus was born. He tells us how Mary and Joseph presented Jesus in the temple and were met by Simeon and Anna. I wonder if even that was disappointing for them.

Way back in the 14th century an Italian artist named Ambrogio Lorenzetti painted this scene. Simeon and Anna are gathered at the altar. Mary and Joseph look on in amazed silence. The prophetess Anna has her eyes fixed on the child. The bearded Simeon, with a solemn look on his face, stares down at the baby in his arms. Yet the baby Jesus at the center of the picture surprises everyone. They all gaze awestruck at him because he's sucking his thumb! The family may marvel, the aged Simeon and Anna may prophesy, but this little child – this thumb sucking baby Jesus – is not exactly what was expected.

Luke doesn't *really* tell us that Jesus was sucking his thumb. But there are some surprising things about this scene.

I. Jesus' parents expect him to fulfill the law.

It starts out normal enough. Mary and Joseph are doing what all Jewish parents knew they were supposed to do. Luke makes that very clear. Look at vv. 22-24.

“And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘EVERY firstborn MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD’), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord, ‘A PAIR OF TURTLEDOVES OR TWO YOUNG PIGEONS.’”

Luke wraps together two ceremonies here, each prescribed in the law of Moses. The first involved the purification of the mother. After the birth of a son, a woman would be ritually unclean for 40 days and there were certain rules and restrictions that went along with that. At the completion of that time she should offer a lamb and a dove or pigeon to the Lord. If she was too poor to offer up a lamb, a second dove or pigeon could be offered. Mary's offering was that of the poor. It's unusual that Luke would speak of *their* purification, as if Joseph was unclean as well. But because of his own involvement in the birth process, it's likely that Joseph had become ritually unclean as well as Mary.

The second ceremony involved the dedication of the firstborn son to God. Remember the story of the

Exodus? God told the Jews to place the blood of a lamb upon their door posts so the angel of death would pass over their homes, sparing their firstborn sons. Since that time God said the firstborn son belongs to him, but an offering of five shekels was to be made by the parents to redeem him back. The unusual thing here is that nothing is said by Luke about the family redeeming the child from his “belonging to God” status. Luke might be hinting at the fact that Jesus is a bit like Samuel, who was dedicated to God and then, after he was weaned, he went to live in the temple. It’s interesting, in the very next scene, the twelve year old Jesus is where? In the temple, doing “his Father’s business.”

Mary and Joseph are doing things by the book. No less than five times in this story does Luke mention that everything was done according to the law. Mary and Joseph are making sure that every “i” is dotted and every “t” is crossed. When our first child was born we followed the book, too. James Dobson was writing *Dare To Discipline* and *The Strong Willed Child*. We didn’t want to goof it up, so we did it by the book. That’s how it is with the firstborn, especially one who came on the scene like Jesus did. You want to do it right.

II. Simeon reveals that Jesus will fulfill the prophet’s dreams.

But it wasn’t long before Joseph and Mary encounter a man who sees much more in their baby than someone who would keep Jewish law. They’re met by an old man named Simeon. Look at vv. 25-32.

“And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 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. And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, ‘Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, and the glory of Your people Israel.’”

Luke takes pains to describe Simeon. He is an ideal Jew. He embodies everything God intended for his people. He is righteous and devout. He operated with integrity towards others and towards God. Not only that, Simeon is waiting for the

consolation of Israel, which is another way of saying he is waiting for the Messiah. This Messiah would bring consolation – comfort to people who were anxious and oppressed. Ironically, the Holy Spirit, who is also called “the Comforter,” is upon him. And the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would actually see the Messiah before he died. Have you ever waited for an important letter that would bring some kind of important news? You knew it would come but until you held it in your hand you could not rest? You check your mailbox daily. We can imagine Simeon entering the temple each and every day, wondering if this would be the day, in a sense waiting for the letter God had promised.

And one day he senses the Spirit leading him into the temple, perhaps at a time he didn’t normally go there. And somehow, at that very moment, Mary and Joseph entered with the Child, and somehow he knew – this was the One. He takes the Child in his arms, he thanks God, and then he begins to pray. He says now he can die a contented man – the letter is come; the comfort has arrived; his dreams are fulfilled.

At first glance, what he says about Jesus is nothing new. He talks about salvation. That note has been struck before. We know that his name means salvation. We heard Mary sing of “God my Savior” and Zacharias praise God for raising up a “horn of salvation” who would deliver them from all their enemies. Even the angel told the shepherds that a Savior had been born. So we’re not all that surprised when Simeon says, “my eyes have seen your salvation.”

But there is a new note here as well. He says this gift of salvation has been prepared for “all peoples.” And then he calls him a “light of revelation for the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel.” Even though the angel Gabriel had told the shepherds, “I bring you good news of great joy, which shall be for all the people,” it was just assumed he meant the people of Israel. But here it is clear as it can be. Israel’s glory is that the Messiah comes through them, but his coming is not just for them; it’s for Gentiles as well. In these days of equal opportunity that may not mean a whole lot to us, but you can be sure it was a shock to Mary and Joseph.

III. Jesus’ parents marvel at the good news.

Look at their reaction. **“And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him”** (v. 33).

That word “amazed” can also be translated “marveled.” Even though they might not understand it all, they could understand enough to see that their son would be more than just a national hero. His impact would be worldwide. I mean, they could imagine the headlines back home: “LOCAL BOY MAKES GOOD.” They could see their son’s face on the cover of *Time* magazine under the banner: SOMETHING GOOD COMES OUT OF NAZARETH.” Then there are the photos. A young boy with

such promise will need to be pictured with all the bigwigs – high priests, scribes, members of the Sanhedrin, even Caesar Augustus! And then, of course, there will be the official parties. Such a worldwide Savior deserves the red carpet treatment. Joseph and Mary must be beaming, like the proud parents of a Heisman Trophy winner, or a summa cum laude graduate of Stanford, or a Nobel Prize winner. Simeon's news is indeed marvelous.

IV. Simeon reveals that good news will be bad news for some.

No wonder v.34 starts out with Simeon blessing Mary and Joseph. Imagine the pride they felt! But then Simeon spoke again, and they must have wondered if they heard him right. Simeon goes on to say that this good news will actually be bad news for some. He turns to Mary with a frown and says,

“And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary His mother, ‘Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed – and a sword will pierce even your own soul – to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed’” (vv. 34-35).

For the first time in Luke's gospel, a dark thread is woven into a bright tapestry. I can just imagine Mary and Joseph's faces falling upon hearing these words. Their first thought might have been, “But wait a minute, we're doing everything right. We're doing everything by the book. How can this be? Where have we gone wrong?” Who wants to have a son described like this?

He'll cause “the fall and rise of many in Israel.” No one will stay the same. Those who stand up and reject him will fall; those who humbly receive him will rise up. By their reaction to him, Jesus will split the nation in two. Some will see him as a “a sign to be opposed” or “spoken against.” Who wants to have a son described like that? He won't be winning “Most Popular” at the Middle School in Nazareth. But why would he garner such opposition? Simeon said the thoughts from many hearts will be exposed. People don't like to be exposed. People who prefer to stay in hiding resent exposure. Imagine having your innermost thoughts broadcast throughout this church for all to hear. No wonder they would oppose him. But that's not all. There will even be a cost to Mary. A sword will pierce her soul. Maybe that means that she will endure what every parent fears most – she'll bury her son. Or maybe it means that Mary herself would have to make up her own mind about him, that her own heart would be exposed and divided.

Simeon's words are mysterious words. But you don't have to be Ph.D. in literature to figure out that there is something very ominous going on here. But we shouldn't be surprised. When you turn on a light, it creates shadows. Thomas Kincaid is called the “painter of light,” but I'm told that shadows are curiously absent from his portraits. There are some who would like to paint Jesus as one who could

not possibly cast a shadow, but that's an impossibility. To be a savior assumes that people need saving. Some people embrace that; others resent it. Some people rise; others fall.

V. Anna reveals that bad news is good news after all.

But the story doesn't end there. There are some people for whom the bad news is good news after all. Look at vv. 36-38.

“And there was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Anna is kind of like the female version of Simeon. Luke takes pains to describe her also as an ideal Jew. Like Miriam and Deborah in the Old Testament, she is a prophetess. She is from the tribe of Asher – one of the lost ten tribes. She's 84 years young and most of that time she's been a widow. When it says she never left the temple, it may mean that she lived in one of the rooms of the many buildings on the temple hill. Anna is the kind of woman who just never missed church. When the door is open she's there, serving the Lord with fastings and prayers.

We don't know how much of what Simeon had to say she had been able to hear, but at any rate it seems rather strange that she would do what she does. She gives thanks to God and she starts spreading the news to those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. I mean, as a woman you would think she's be consoling Mary instead of giving thanks! The way Luke lays this story out it sure appears that she does what she does in full view of Simeon's words. I wonder why. Perhaps Anna has lived long enough to know that what is bad news for some is good news for others.

VI. Depending on where a person is coming from, the coming of Jesus can be good news or bad news.

What makes the difference? Why is does the coming of Jesus good news for some and bad news for others? I believe the answer lies in Simeon and Anna. We've seen how Luke takes real pains to paint a very vivid picture of these two. And the thought that jumps off the page to me because of its similarity in verse 25 and verse 38 is that both were looking and hoping for God to do something. Verse 25 says Simeon was “looking for the consolation of Israel.” Verse 38 says Anna spoke of the child “to all those who were looking

for the redemption of Jerusalem,” which no doubt she was doing also. You see, Simeon and Anna saw the coming of Christ as good news rather than bad news because they looking and longing and waiting for God to break into history again and bring consolation and redemption.

In the back of Luke’s mind might have been an ancient prophecy from the mouth of Isaiah. He says, **“Break forth, shout joyfully together, you waste places of Jerusalem. For the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem”** (Is. 52:9). In the coming of Christ, this prophecy was fulfilled. The Lord has consoled his people – that’s what Simeon was looking for; and the Lord has redeemed Jerusalem – that’s what Anna was looking for.

Consolation speaks to those longings for healing and restoration from all past losses and miseries of life. Have you ever been comforted? In the course of several years, the late Joe Baylie saw three of his children die. When one of them died, he says, “I was sitting there torn by grief. Someone called and talked of God’s dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly. He said things I knew were true. I was unmoved, except to wish he’d go away. He finally did. Another came and sat beside me. He didn’t talk. He didn’t ask me leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, and left. I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go.” That’s comfort. It’s that kind of comfort Jesus would bring to the hurting.

Redemption speaks to our need to be delivered from powers that hold us in bondage. It could be the power of sin. It could be the power of death. It could be the power of Satan. A pastor met a young boy in front of his church carrying a rusty cage in which several birds fluttered nervously. The pastor asked, “Son, where did you get those birds? The boy said, “I trapped them out in the fields.” The pastor asked, “What are you going to do with them?” The boy said, “I’m going to play with them, and then I guess I’ll just feed them to an old cat we have at home.” Then the pastor offered to buy them and the boy tried to talk him out of it because they were good for nothing. The pastor said, “I’ll give you ten dollars for the cage and the birds.” The boy felt bad for the pastor but agreed. He walked off with his cash and the pastor walked to the back of the church and opened the cage and let the birds go. The next Sunday he took the empty cage into the pulpit and used it to explain how Christ had redeemed those destined for destruction, not with a few dollars but with his own

life. That’s what Anna was looking for. That’s what Jesus does.

The question we have to ask ourselves is, are we looking for that? Are we looking for comfort and redemption? In one sense, if we’ve already trusted Christ as Lord and Savior, we were looking for that and we found it in him. In another sense, we can see this same truth in relation to Christ’s second coming. We look forward to a day when our consolation and redemption will be completed at the Second Coming of Christ. I think we can say that not only in relation to the first coming but also in relation to the second coming, this bad news is good news for those who are waiting for the consolation and redemption that can only come from Christ.

But what about those who have not yet trusted Christ as Savior and Lord, or at least those who are unsure of that. If you are satisfied with life as it is; if you have no longing in your heart for consolation or redemption, this good news of Christ is ultimately bad news. He’ll be to you a stumbling block over which you will fall; he’ll ultimately be a sign you will oppose; he’ll expose your heart and you will refuse to stay in the light.

But perhaps God has been graciously and tenderly frustrating you with life that is not centered on Christ. Maybe he’s been filling you with longings and desires that cannot find their fulfillment in cars or houses or careers or relationships or anything else this world has to offer. Maybe he’s been exposing your own heart, and you see there a need for someone beyond yourself to comfort you and redeem you.

Whenever I plant new plants in my yard, I’ve learned that to give them the most chance to survive I have to be a little ruthless with them. When I take them out of their plastic container I inspect the soil ball. If the plant has been growing in its pot so long that the roots are circling the bottom I jab my finger into the bottom of the soil and pull down to untangle the roots. If the whole pot is filled with circling roots, I have to be merciless. I don’t worry if I break some roots; that’s better than allowing the roots to continue to circle when the plants are growing in the garden. The rougher the treatment; the more chance they have to survive.

Maybe you feel like you have roughed up a bit. But maybe that is God’s severe mercy, because through that you have come to long for comfort and redemption. If this is true of you, then the coming of Christ is good news. The good news is that Christ has come and he will come again and no one is able to bring you consolation and redemption like Jesus Christ.

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