

"A Sword Will Pierce Your Soul"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

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Luke 2:21–35 (Common English Bible)

²¹ When eight days had passed [after Jesus' birth], Jesus' parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus. This was the name given to him by the angel before he was conceived.

²² When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (²³ It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") ²⁴ They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

²⁵ A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. ²⁸ Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said,

²⁹ "Now, master, let your servant go in
peace according to your word,

³⁰ because my eyes have seen your salvation.

³¹ You prepared this salvation in the
presence of all peoples.

³² It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and a glory for your people Israel."

³³ His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. ³⁴ Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."

John 19:25–30 (Common English Bible)

²⁵ Jesus' mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene stood near the cross. ²⁶ When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, "Woman, here is your son." ²⁷ Then he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home.

²⁸ After this, knowing that everything was already completed, in order to fulfill the scripture, Jesus said, "I am thirsty." ²⁹ A jar full of sour wine was nearby, so the soldiers soaked a sponge in it, placed it on a hyssop branch, and held it up to his lips. ³⁰ When he had received the sour wine, Jesus said, "It is completed." Bowing his head, he gave up his life.

Romans 1:16-17; 3:21-24 (Common English Bible)

¹⁶ I'm not ashamed of the gospel: it is God's own power for salvation to all who have faith in God, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ God's righteousness is being revealed in the gospel, from faithfulness for faith, as it is written, The righteous person will live by faith.

²¹ But now God's righteousness has been revealed apart from the Law, which is confirmed by the Law and the Prophets. ²² God's righteousness comes through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who have faith in him. There's no distinction. ²³ All have sinned and fall short of God's glory, ²⁴ but all are treated as righteous freely by his grace because of a ransom that was paid by Christ Jesus.

It may seem a bit odd, even discomfoting, to talk about Good Friday. But we have to work to keep our hearts and minds on the meaning of the incarnation, namely, that God loves us. And how do we know this? By the cross.

Last week we began Advent with the end of Mary's story and her confidence that one day she would be resurrected just as her son, Jesus, had been. By beginning with the end of the story, we laid Christmas and Easter alongside one another.

Today, we move backward from Easter to Good Friday. It may seem very "non-Adventish" to consider Jesus' crucifixion as we prepare ourselves to celebrate his birth. But when God became incarnate, born to a young woman from Nazareth in Galilee, God began a journey

that would take him inexorably toward a Roman cross erected at a spot called Golgotha. And here's the thing. Mary knew of this dark path before Jesus had taken even a single step. An old man of God told her the news no mother wants to hear.

Waiting and expecting

Simeon is old. He is righteous and devout, and pretty much just waiting to die. But he wants to live long enough to see the salvation of Israel. Simeon knew that things were not right. He needed only to look up at the Roman soldiers standing atop the Antonia Fortress to be reminded, for the fortress sat adjacent to the Lord's temple in Jerusalem. Israel had

Redemption and Purification¹

Jewish Law prescribed certain rituals after childbirth. First, all male infants were circumcised on the eighth day after birth (verse 21).

Second, as a reminder of the Exodus (when the firstborn of Egypt died and the Israelites were redeemed out of their slavery), the first child born to a couple was consecrated to the Lord's service. Then, the infant would be redeemed (bought back) at a price of five shekels. Luke notes Jesus' consecration (verse 22 and 23) but makes no mention of Jesus' redemption ritual. Perhaps Luke didn't know all the specifics of Jewish Law and custom. Or, perhaps Luke wants to make the point that Jesus remained consecrated to the Lord, that his parents never redeemed him from the Lord's service.

Purification of the mother was a third ritual. After the birth of a male child, the mother was ceremonially unclean for seven days and then went through a 33 day purification period. This period was twice as long for mothers of female infants. (Don't ask me why!) While she was ritually unclean the mother could not enter the temple nor touch any holy object. After the 40 (or 80) days the mother was to offer to the Lord a lamb and either a pigeon or a turtledove. If the mother could not afford a lamb, she could instead offer two turtledoves or pigeons. Mary can offer only the two birds (verse 24), illustrating something of Mary's family economic situation.

Simeon and Anna encounter the infant Jesus when Mary brings him to the temple for his consecration (verse 27).

¹This is drawn from R. Alan Culpepper's commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter's Bible*. This twelve volume commentary set is in the St. Andrew library thanks to a generous donation.

suffered for so long. But now, the Holy Spirit has assured Simeon that he will live to see the realization of his hope.

One day, on what must have felt a bit like an impulse, Simeon went to the temple. There, he saw a young woman, a girl really, with her husband. They were carrying a newborn into the temple to be consecrated. As soon as Simeon laid eyes on the child, he knew that he could die in peace, exclaiming, "because my eyes have seen your salvation." Simeon was not speaking of his personal salvation. Salvation for the Jews had nothing to do with "getting to heaven" or any other path to personal redemption.

Instead, the salvation for which Simeon had been waiting was the salvation of Israel and, hence, the world. The child, this Messiah-child, would be the fulfillment of God's promise that Israel would be redeemed from sin and restored to a right relationship with God. In other words, God had made a covenant with Israel and that covenant would be kept by the baby in Mary's arms. And as had been promised to Abraham two millennia before (Genesis 12), all the world would be blessed through Israel. The baby was to be a light to the Gentiles every bit as much as to the Jews.

All this was revealed to Simeon in those few moments. And we can be sure that, despite the events surrounding Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph were astounded by the appearance of this old man and what he had to say. But Simeon wasn't finished.

The baby would create turmoil not peace. Many would speak against him. Jesus would reveal what is really in people's hearts, which is, of course, often not very pretty. And, in a statement that surely cut to Mary's heart, Simeon saw suffering ahead, saying to the new mother, "A sword will pierce your own soul as well." It might be all angels and adoration now, but the coming of God's kingdom would exact a high price, not only from Jesus, but from his mother also.

Mary at the cross

If Mary is anything like most of the people I've known, Simeon's warning about the darkness that lay over the baby and his mother faded into the distant past. But as Jesus began his public ministry, the violence and threats against Jesus would have been impossible to ignore. Even when Jesus spoke in his own village of Nazareth, his neighbors were enraged, nearly throwing him off a nearby cliff.

We know that Mary was in Jerusalem in the days leading up to Jesus' trial and crucifixion. John tells us specifically that she was among the women present at the cross (John 19:25-27). Surely, in those moments, if not before, the memory of Simeon's warning from three decades earlier came rushing back to her. No parent should ever have to endure the death of their child. And Mary had to endure her son's painful and humiliating death by execution, mocked and jeered by nearly all.

Yet even as death neared, Mary was reminded of her son's love for her. John writes, "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that time on, this disciple took her into his home." Even as his death fast approached, Jesus made sure that his mother would be taken care of. And as we saw last week, it is likely that Mary and John eventually made their way to Ephesus where Mary lived out her life in a small stone house on a mountainside above the city.

She must have reflected on what it meant. How could it go from angels to a cross? Was this really what God had in mind when she became pregnant with the Son of the Most High? Wasn't God's Messiah supposed to arrive in power and might and wonder and glory?

Mary herself was really the first clue to what lay ahead. God's son wasn't born in mighty palaces to be raised among the rich and famous. The only begotten son of God was born to a peasant girl from an obscure village. The birth was announced first to shepherds, who occupied the lowest rung of Jewish society.

But crucifixion? Must it have been this way? Couldn't her son, the miracle worker, have found another way forward? What did it all mean? We don't know if Mary ever got the answers to these questions, but over the next several decades the Christians would arrive at answers, led by apostles like Paul, who sought to understand the meaning of the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection.

The Faithfulness of Jesus Christ

We ask the same questions that Mary and the all the first followers of Jesus asked. Why the cross? In light of the resurrection, what did it mean? What did Jesus accomplish by his death?

Christians often speak of their "faith in Jesus," sometimes leaving the impression that their own trust in Jesus saved them. *But that can't be right.* We have been made right with God by his grace – so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:9). As Paul writes, Jesus became a curse, hung on a tree, so that we might be redeemed. *It is Jesus who has saved us not we ourselves*—by his faithfulness all the way to the horror of death, even death on a cross. He knew what lay ahead, anyone would have known. Others had claimed the mantle of Messiah and died for it.

So wasn't there another way? Jesus had prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane for just such a way, but there was none. If Jesus was going to be true to the vocation given him by God, if he was going to genuinely love God and neighbor without fail, then he would inevitably collide with the dark powers of this world, with those invested in and committed to their way, rather than God's way. It was true then; it is true now.

The apostle Paul was tasked with trying to understand what Jesus' death on a cross really meant. What did it say about God and his work in this world? Why was Jesus born? For what purpose? Why did God humble himself in this way, taking on a full-blooded humanity and dying on a cross? If your answer to these questions is "to save us," you are right so far as it goes. But God's rescue involves far more than just us. It is the keeping of promises that God made long before, such as those to Jeremiah.

Grasping that Jesus' birth, death, and resurrection demonstrate God's faithfulness to his promises is the key theme of Paul's letter to the Romans. Like Jeremiah, Jesus and Paul lived in a time of great turmoil, as many Jews resisted Roman rule. They awaited the day when God would finally keep his promises, when, as written the scroll of Jeremiah, "I [God] will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is right and just in the land" (Jeremiah 33:15, CEB).

But the Jews had waited many centuries and it was natural for some to wonder if God's promises would forever go unfulfilled. The Jews knew that they weren't really keeping their end of the covenant God had made with them – they didn't really love God and neighbor every day and in every way. But still, where was God?

For Paul, the fact of Jesus' faithfulness, even to death on a cross, revealed that God had kept his promises. In a sense, Jesus was the "righteousness of God" in the flesh.

Jesus was the way out of the covenant dilemma. Despite the unwillingness or inability of the Jews to live up to the covenant and to be the light to the world, God had provided the means of covenant-keeping – a thoroughly faithful Jew, Jesus Christ, the one Jew who did truly love God and love neighbor without fail. Jesus' own faithfulness to the covenant and to God all the way to the cross revealed that God is not only the covenant maker, but the covenant keeper. In Christ, God's covenant people had been restored to a right relationship with God. Hence, they had been saved. And who are these covenant people? Namely those who have faith in Jesus Christ, Paul writes.

To reiterate, God's righteousness (his covenant faithfulness) was revealed to the world through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, for the rescuing of all who believe. This is the Good News. This is the Christmas message for the whole world that we are to bring them. Alleluia!

God's "Long Game"

Underlying all God's promises is the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. Yes, Abraham will become the father of a great nation. Yes, he will go to the land given him by God. But, more importantly, "all the families of the earth shall be blessed" through Abraham. In the Old Testament, blessing is a gift from God, encompassing material well-being, peace, and success in life. Blessing shapes the lives of Abraham's family and the "outsiders" they meet.

Abraham was not chosen by God merely for his own sake, but for the sake of others. God rescues the Hebrews from Egypt for the sake of the whole world. Jesus' disciples were not chosen for their sake alone but for the sake of the whole world. The same is true for you and me. We have been saved for a purpose larger than ourselves.

Now of course, it was always easy for the Israelites to forget that they were to be the city on the hill to which all nations would stream (Isaiah 2:2-5; Matthew 5:14-16). It was tempting to them, as it is tempting to us, to turn inward, to build barriers, to see people as "outsiders." Jesus would remind his fellow Jews that they were to be the "light to the world." They were to face outward, pulling down walls and serving others. . . . But it all began with that promise to Abraham.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Christmas and Good Friday. It is hard not to see that those two days belong together. The latter explains the former. How do you and your family go about keeping foremost the "reason for the season"?
2. Mary and Joseph bring the baby Jesus to the temple for the performance of Jewish rituals. What is the place of ritual observance in your own Christian life? Prayer before meals is an example of a ritual practiced each day by some Christians. Do you think of it as a ritual? Why or why not? What are some other examples? Alan Culpepper writes, "Essential to Judaism is the praise of God in all of life. The Jewish Law taught that God was to be honored in one's rising up and lying down, in going out and coming in, in how one dressed and how one ate." How much does our own life reflect our praise of God?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Monday, Exodus 13:2, 11-16 Consecration of the first-born	Tuesday, Leviticus 12 The rituals of purification after childbirth
Wednesday, Luke 2:21-40 The full story of Simeon and Anna	Thursday, 2:15-21; Galatians 3:10-14 We are made right with God by Jesus' faithfulness. Note – use the footnoted translation “faith of Christ” or “faithfulness” of Christ in the NRSV or NIV2011. The Common English Bible uses the better translation in the body of the main text.
Friday, Philippians 2:1-11 A hymn to Jesus' faithfulness all the way to death, even death on a cross.	Weekly Prayer Concerns

