

“Sweet Bitterness”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron
December 27, 2020 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – December 27, 2020

“Christians, Awake” #135 in the Book of Praise

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Christians awake salute the happy morn
Whereon the Saviour of the world was born
Rise to adore the mystery of love
Which hosts of angels chanted from above
With them the joyful tidings first begun
Of God incarnate and the Virgin's Son

Then to the watchful shepherds it was told
Who heard the angelic herald's voice behold
I bring good tidings of a Saviour's birth
To you and all the nations upon earth
This day hath God fulfilled His promised word
This day is born a Saviour Christ the Lord

Then went the shepherds straight to Bethlehem
To see the wonder that was told to them
And found with Joseph and the blessed maid
Her son the Saviour in a manger laid
Joyful the wondrous story they proclaim
The first apostles of his infant fame

O may we keep and ponder in our mind
God's wondrous love in saving humankind
Trace we the Babe who hath retrieved our loss
From His poor manger to His bitter cross
Tread in His steps assisted by His grace
Till our first heavenly state again takes place

“What child is this” #161 in the Book of Praise

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What Child is this who laid to rest
On Mary's lap is sleeping
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet
While shepherds watch are keeping
This this is Christ the King
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing
Haste haste to bring Him laud
The Babe the Son of Mary

Why lies He in such mean estate
Where ox and ass are feeding
Good Christian fear for sinners here
The silent Word is pleading
Nails spear shall pierce Him through
The cross be borne for me for you
Hail hail the Word made flesh
The Babe the Son of Mary

So bring Him incense gold and myrrh
Come peasant king to own Him
The King of kings salvation brings
Let loving hearts enthrone Him
Raise raise the song on high
The Virgin sings her lullaby
Joy joy for Christ is born
The Babe the Son of Mary

“Once in royal David’s city” #166 in the Book of Praise vs 1, 2, 3, 4

Cecil Frances Humphreys Alexander | Henry John Gauntlett

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Once in royal David's city
Stood a lowly cattle shed
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for His bed
Mary was that mother mild
Jesus Christ her little child

He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all
And His shelter was a stable
And His cradle was a stall
With the poor and meek and lowly
Lived on earth our Saviour holy

And our eyes at last shall see Him
Through His own redeeming love
For that child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above
And He leads His children on
To the place where He has gone

Not in that poor lowly stable
With the oxen standing by
We shall see him, but in heaven
Set at God’s right hand on high
There God’s children gather round
Bright like stars with glory crowned

Scripture Texts: Galatians 4:4-7

⁴ But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶ And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷ So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Luke 2:22-40

²² 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 firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), ²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated 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; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which 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 the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶ There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Here we are. It's the Sunday after Christmas. We have shared the wonderful story, celebrated in whatever way worked for us this year, and worshipped with the carols of the season. On this first Sunday of the Christmas season, we still sing the carols and reflect with awe on the birth of the Saviour. God came to us as a tiny child, just like us, but oh did that child grow to be someone unique and world-altering.

I can't imagine what may have been going through dear Mary's head as the events of the story played out.

An angelic visitor with a rather daunting message;

A pregnancy that no one would understand;

Giving birth in a stable;

A visit from shepherds;

And, of course, the exhaustion and elation of having given birth to her first child.

What a roller coaster for the young woman that would be the Saviour's mother.

And then today's story happened. She and Joseph took their infant to the Temple for presentation before the Lord and to fulfill the requirements of the Law. They made their sacrifice and presented the child. Simeon, advanced in years and deeply trusting that God would fulfill the promise of salvation, saw them arrive, and he had some amazing things to say, including the proclamation that he could be dismissed by the Lord in peace, for he had seen the light of salvation, the promised One that would save God's people. He said this child would be responsible for the fall and rise of many of the people of God, and that the opposition he would encounter would take a nasty direction. And then the dreadful words:
and a sword will pierce your own soul too.

My own kids are now 16 and 20 years old, but I clearly remember the days we presented each of them for baptism. They were such special days, worth celebrating with friends and family, some of whom traveled quite a distance to be present to witness this defining moment in our children's lives, and in ours as parents. The vows we took on their behalf were not taken lightly, and we have done our best to make sure our boys have been raised in the love and knowledge of Jesus and in the community of the church. As their mother, the day each of my sons was baptized are days I will keep in my heart forever. It doesn't seem that long ago, even though they were both infants when they were baptized.

At the time of baptism, had anyone said my boys were destined to be the catalyst for the fall and rise of many, and that a sword would pierce my heart when they experienced opposition, well, I'm not sure how I would have reacted. It's hard enough to be a good and effective parent without that kind of pressure. My mother-in-law has a saying that a mother is only as happy as her saddest child. I hurt when my boys hurt. I go all mother-bear if someone causes them grief. I

love them more than I can describe, and yet I know they are their own selves, and they must make their own decisions for their lives, hopefully based on what we have taught them as parents, as they grow and mature into adulthood. If someone were to have told me my heart or soul would be pierced with a sword because of what would happen to either of my children, I don't know how I would have reacted. I would certainly have been even more of an anxious and stressed out mom than I was to begin with.

Going back to Simeon's words, it is interesting that he phrases it as he does. I recently read a commentary that reflected on the fact that Simeon says Mary's child will be responsible for the falling and rising of many in Israel. In our normal patterns of speech, we would be more likely to say the rising and falling, not the other way around, which is what Simeon says. The same with Anna. We would likely say she worshipped day and night, not night and day as is reported in today's text from Luke. Most often I read through this story without even noticing the reversed phrases, but there is something significant about it. Falling comes before rising; night comes before day.

The Rev. Melinda Quivik PhD, Liturgical and Homiletical Scholar writes, "These words [falling and rising] are keyed to struggles and sorrows, in keeping with the truth of human life. Simeon tells Mary that 'a sword will pierce' her soul... She will experience great pain, thorough agony, and the madness of those who witness injustice and are unable to stop it. When we who live on this side of the crucifixion and resurrection hear Simeon's words, we have a way to know something of what Mary endures watching her son die. Or maybe we can never know; at least we honour the torment... She stands beside his cross. She watches. Before the rising is the falling. Before the glory of God is the cross."¹

Simeon's words are sometimes used at the conclusion of a worship service, particularly when Communion is celebrated. When we have received the grace of Christ through participation in the sacrament, we have heard and experienced the living Word of God assuring us that forgiveness of our sins is real, and it came at a tremendous and yet glorious cost.

These words are also often heard toward the closing of a funeral service, at the graveside as we hear the words of committal:

Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace:

Your word has been fulfilled.

My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people:

A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel.

Simeon's words fill us with a sense of completion, a sense of fulfillment. God has kept the promise made so long ago. It is a word of assurance and hope. God has done what we needed.

¹ Workingpreacher.org, Resources for Dec. 27, 2020, Luke 2:22-40, The Rev. Melinda Quivik PhD.

Christ was promised.
Christ was born.
Christ has died.
Christ is risen.
Christ will come again.

Notice the order of events. Foretelling... birth... death... resurrection... foretelling. The fall and rise is obvious.

We cannot be lifted up if we have not fallen.
We cannot be healed if we have not been hurt.
We cannot be restored if we have not been broken.
We cannot be renewed if we have not been exhausted.
We cannot experience resurrection if we have not experienced death.
It's a difficult pattern to endure, but it is the pattern of life.

As people come for support in their grief and bereavement, I often hear stories of relief being experienced at the end of a long and difficult illness. Many feel guilty about that, but there is no reason to feel that way. Our loved ones sometimes endure pain and anguish that can only be healed by a return to our Creator where they are made whole and perfect. It is a relief for them. It is naturally a relief for us. Swords pierce our souls, but hope endures. Healing comes.

As Mary presented her son in the Temple that day, she was warned by one that trusted and obeyed God to the end, that she would endure that soul-piercing moment, but the story doesn't end with Simeon's words.

Anna enters the story to remind us that rising follows falling. *She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.*

Rising follows falling.
Day follows night.
Redemption follows sinfulness.
Praise follows warning.

Anna pulls us back to the good news that permeates the disturbing news. As much as Simeon's words bring anxiety to the heart, Anna's praise brings reassurance. We know how the whole story progresses from here. We know Jesus will grow from an infant in the Temple, to a boy in the Temple, to a Teacher in an upper room, to a Saviour on the cross who will leave the tomb behind, giving those who believe in him as the Son of God an eternity of life in the Kingdom. We know how a sword will pierce Mary's soul because it pierces ours too. We also know how her joy will be restored because ours will be too. The words spoken by Simeon and the praise and proclamation expressed by Anna remind us that this is a story filled with downs and ups. It is sweet bitterness.

To quote Rev. Quivik again, “When we end our worship with the words of Simeon, we acknowledge that we, too, have seen the Lord. We have been given a vision of the peace Simeon knew after such a long wait in the temple. We have heard the word of the Lord, confessed our sin, and received forgiveness. Whether or not we are able to be present to each other in person in [these] late months of 2020 because of a pandemic—whether or not we are given the bread of life in person—we receive through God’s Word the promise of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness. This is enough for us to sing thanksgiving for this vision of the Lord’s real presence in our lives. We sing Simeon’s own experience when we sing his words.”²

As this tumultuous year comes to a close, we look toward a new year that we hope will bring some healing to the brokenness we have seen and experienced over the past many months. We look forward to the conquering of the virus that has changed the world. We look forward to continued advocacy and calls for justice for all people. We look forward to more awareness of the needs of people around us, in our nation and around the world. We look forward to what God will do, because our God never stops working in, among and around us. We look forward, because we trust God to lead us into a future filled with his grace, healing, redemption and unconditional love. Thanks be to God for having stayed with us throughout our lives to this point, throughout this year of turmoil, and for the promise to stay with us always, by the grace of his Son and the protective presence of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Ibid.