Luke 2:25-35

The Sacred Song of Simeon

Sermon

Good morning church! I just want to say thank you for allowing me to the opportunity to preach here this morning. It's been a while since Lorrie and I have been here on a Sunday morning and it's such a blessing to be here. Lorrie would love to be here but unfortunately we have a sick boy at home so if you could please pray for him we would be grateful.

We are currently going through a series on the different songs of Christmas. I came to faith in my 20's and I remember that suddenly Christmas lyrics actually made sense to me! So I have enjoyed this series looking at the stories behind the songs we sing.

This morning I want for us to consider the song O Holy Night. This song has an interesting backstory. It has impacted many people, but in different ways over the last 200 years. Just as my interpretation of Christmas songs has changed, the lyrics of this song have been interpreted in a variety of ways.

The song was first written as a poem in 1847 by a Frenchman named "Placide Cappeau" who was a commissionaire of wines in a small French town. His parish priest surprised him by asking him to write this poem for Christmas mass. Using the gospel of Luke, "Placide" wrote this beautiful poem entitled the "Cantique de Noel" which he was so moved by, he decided to ask one of his composer friends, Adolphe Charles Adams, to compose music to his poem. Adams was Jewish, and therefore didn't view Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah, but nevertheless was compelled by his friendship to Cappeau to write the music. Not long after, Cappeau walked away from the faith, and when it was further discovered that O Holy Night was written by an unbelieving Jew, the church denounced the song. However, many of the French people loved the song and continued to sing it until it was eventually discovered by an American Unitarian minister in Northampton Massachusetts by the name of John Sullivan Dwight. Unitarians deny the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus Christ as well as many other important truths of the faith. Dwight saw the song as important to assist him in his abolition of slavery endeavors. "Truly He taught us to love one another; his law is love and his gospel is peace. Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother". Being a unitarian, the focus on Jesus' teaching of love rather than His divinity along with the songs seeming denouncement of slavery (although Cappeau probably didn't intend the lyrics to be received as speaking of "physical" slavery) – these lyrics supported Dwight's own view of slavery and unitarianism. Back in France, legend has it that in 1871 during the Franco-Prussian war, in the midst of a fierce battle, one soldier suddenly jumped out of his trench and in French quoted out loud the opening lines of "Cantique de Noel". To which a soldier on the opposing side sprung out of his trench and quoted the opening lines of Martin Luther's song, "From Heaven above to Earth I Come". The story goes that the fighting stopped for the next 24 hours. Last story, a professor by the name of Fessenden on Christmas Eve 1906 spoke through a microphone over radio waves for the first time in history. Many were astounded to hear this new innovation of speaking over the radio – prior to this point there was only morse code. They were shocked! Instead of hearing the normal morse code, they

heard the gospel of Luke being quoted by Fessenden, after which he took out his violin and softly played O Holy Night over the radio waves.

So you have a French parishioner who wrote the poem and left the faith. You have a Jewish composer who was indifferent to the lyrics because He didn't believe the words in the poem. You have a unitarian pastor who used some of the lyrics to support the abolition of slavery, and yet denied his own slavery to sin and the deity of Christ. You have a soldier who used the lyrics to bring about a 24 hour peace treaty. And you have a professor who felt that the first words and music to be heard over radio waves ought to be inspired by the story of Jesus in the gospel of Luke.

Each of these people have a different perspective on the lyrics, and thus on the birth of Jesus Christ. Consider with me some of the lyrics:

"*it is the night of our dear Saviors birth", "long lay the world in sin and error pining", "chains shall He break for the slave is our brother", "fall on your knees", "Oh night divine, Oh night when Christ was born, Oh night divine".*

What do the lyrics mean to you? What makes the night of Christmas divine to you? Who do YOU say this Jesus born in a manger is?

In our text this morning, we have the perspective of a Jewish man named Simeon. A man who was devout in his faith, and filled with the Holy Spirit, who had a unique calling from God to make his mark on history with a glorious evaluation of the child, Jesus.

First, let's set the stage by looking at **The promise given to Simeon (Luke 2:25-28)**

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, [Simeon is presented as a simple layman, not a priest, who lived in Jerusalem. There are false writings which depict Simeon as a priest who is 112 years old, and Mary as being a perpetual virgin. There is nothing that says that in this text and we have no reason to believe he was a priest because *he came into the temple*, he wasn't at work in the temple.] **and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.** [so Simeon was a god-fearing Jew with a unique calling of God. The Holy Spirit was upon him in a unique way that was uncommon for the Jewish people. Simeon was "waiting for the consolation of Israel" – the word "consolation" could be translated, "comforter". Luke and Simeon in this passage are making several allusions to the prophet Isaiah 40-66 where Isaiah depicts the Messiah as "the Comforter of Israel". The opening line of Isaiah 40-66 reads, "**Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. (Isa. 40:1; 49:13; 51:3; 57:18).** In fact, one title the Jewish people used for the Messiah was "Me nahem" or "Consolation". **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.** [again…a unique calling upon his life, and somehow it had been revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until this promise was fulfilled to him. So Simeon was not only a god-fearing man, but he was a blessed man and he received a special work of the Holy Spirit to carry out a special task before he died]. **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,** [this would have been around 40 days after the birth of Jesus. According to the "custom of the law" Jesus was to be circumcised on the 8th day (2:21), Mary was to enter a time of purification for 33 days, and then she was to come to the temple to offer the proper sacrifices for her purification period. Also, Jesus, being the firstborn male, was to be presented to

the Lord and a redemption price was to be paid by the parents for Him (this price was paid to God because God spared the firstborn of Israel in Egypt when He took the Egyptians firstborn). Simeon, led by the Spirit, comes into the temple - this was probably in the outer courts of the temple where women could be, and he spots Jesus! We have no idea how Simeon knew…for sure it wasn't a yellow halo shining over the head of Jesus. But somehow the Spirit led him to Jesus. The promise was given, and the promise was fulfilled. He "took him up in his arms" and "blessed God and said".

Here are two facts…1) there was a Jewish man who lived named Jesus, and 2) everyone has a perspective of Jesus! What is your perspective on Jesus? The church later turned the evaluation of Simeon into a sacred song. Let's look at Simeon's unique perspective…

First, Simeon believed that **Jesus' birth meant salvation had come (2:29-30)**

[29] "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; [30] for my eyes have seen your salvation [the common view among the Jews was that Messiah would come to save Israel from their enemies. This may have been how Simeon saw "salvation". How do you sing the words, "it is the night of our dear, SAVIORS birth"? We have the benefit of a greater revelation than the Jewish people because we have the entire Bible which teaches us that we have all sinned and because of our *eternal* crime against an *eternal*, holy, God, we are facing the just, *eternal* punishment of hell which the Bible describes as a place of fire, and conscious torment and suffering that lasts forever and ever. That's what we're saved from. Jesus didn't come to overthrow the enemies around us, but the enemy within us – sin that leads to fire. ***Salvation, then, is to be saved from judgment that leads to fire!*** Salvation isn't, as Dwight and the Unitarians believe, "*a continuous process of personal growth, ethical living, and actively working to repair harm in the world*". Salvation is FROM FIRE! So many people say, "he's a hell, fire, and brimstone preacher", as though there were any other preaching to be preached! Salvation is from FIRE! Can you imagine for a moment the torment of FIRE forever and ever all the while knowing that salvation was provided by God through Jesus and all you needed to do was to look upon the Son of God and receive His free gift and a million years from now, in torment, all you will wish you could do would be to change your perspective in this life about Jesus!? That's awful! Jesus went through hell upon a cross so that you can escape the flames! If you were in a burning building, half dead, smoke inhalation, no way out, and a firefighter came crashing in, scooped you up, and carried you out of the flames you'd say, "He Saved Me!" This fire is far worse than that fire. And the Bible says that if you have not been saved from the fire through Jesus, you are walking along the edge of the fire every day because at any moment you could fall in when you die in "that car crash" later today. The Bible is clear that this salvation is offered to you in THIS LIFE and that if you do not receive it, when you die you will face the judgment of God and one of the greatest sins you will have committed will be that you rejected the firefighter! Imagine a firefighter coming to grab you and you say, "no thank you, I will get myself out of this mess thank you very much!" You can't get yourself out of this fire! The disciples went everywhere and they preached Christ crucified and they taught clearly, "There is no other name under heaven by which a man MUST BE SAVED!" Don't put it off because you don't know when your life is over. Don't walk on the edge of the fire and don't play games with God! If you have been saved, "Fall on your knees!", and sing praise to the Savior, "Oh night divine!", this Christmas season because He saved you from eternal fire!

Second perspective of Simeon, **Jesus' birth was to be a revelation to the nations (Luke 2:31-32a)**

31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles [So Simeon viewed this salvation as "being prepared" providentially, in the plan of God, in the mind of God. There is a word of sovereign providence here. God has steered, or prepared, this salvation to come in just the right way, in just the right place, and at just the right time. Gal. 4:4 tells us that "in the fullness of time" Christ was born. This salvation is providentially prepared, "in the presence of all peoples". The word "peoples" is probably speaking of the nations. Luke's gospel is uniquely written to a Gentile (a non-Jew) named Theophilus, so it would make sense that Luke would include this word of "revelation to the Gentiles". Again, drawing upon Isaiah 40-66, Simeon and Luke are weaving together the prepared plan of God to reach the nations through Israel's Messiah. One passage in particular that Simeon might have been thinking of was in Isaiah 60:1-3 – **"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. 3 And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isa. 60:1-3)** This idea of "light" to the Gentiles would later be preached by the apostle Paul: **that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:23)**

Light has come…that's why we celebrate Christmas. It has been entrusted to us, like the passing of a torch, and we are to bring that light to everyone everywhere. I don't know what inspired Fessenden to read the birth story of Jesus from Luke over the radio waves…but I'm sure it impacted the listeners. A ship at sea in the darkness, and suddenly, shockingly, light poured over the radio. There are hurting people everywhere this season, and we are given this glorious privilege to be a light to them and to remind them that "light and salvation" have come!

Third perspective of Simeon - **Jesus' birth meant vindication for Israel (Luke 2:32)**…look at the final statement in v.32:

and for glory to your people Israel. [So the revelation is for the Gentiles, but the glory is for Israel. I think the word "glory" is used here in the sense of "honor" or "vindication". Simeon is praising God because for years the nation of Israel had waited for their Messiah and nothing, and they had been stepped on by the nations surrounding them, and their unique glory as God's special people seemed to be challenged…but the Messiah had now come and His coming served as a vindication of the glory of Israel as being God's chosen and special people who would bring forth the Savior of the world.

In summary, this Song of Simeon teaches us that God desires to save, but it's according to His plan found in Jesus. This plan was promised to Israel and this plan has a universal scope…a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and a vindication for the nation of Israel who had waited for their coming Messiah.]

Finally, the fourth perspective of Simeon - **Jesus' birth meant that division was coming (Luke 2:33-35)**

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." [Jesus is like a sword that comes in and separates the "thoughts of the hearts" of those who "fall" and of those who will "rise". Simeon's perspective is that division is coming. "this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel" – Jesus would divide the nation. Many would "fall" because of Him, many would "oppose" Him, and many would "rise". The word for "rise" here is also used of the resurrection promised to the saints. He gives a personal note to Mary, as

the mother of Jesus she too would be "pierced with the sword" as Jesus would bring about conflict in her life, in their families life, and in their nation ending in His own death on the cross – Mary would face much conflict in her soul. Even in their hometown, Jesus brought division. When Jesus read the scroll of the Messiah in Isaiah in the synagogue of Nazareth, there was a great division that ensued. Some of the people believed, and some of them opposed Him and wanted to throw Him off of a cliff. You have to remember how close people were in that culture…you have to think small town, and then include the fact that these people all frequently met together in synagogue…this was Jesus' family. The gospel of Jesus Christ brings division…it always has, and it always will. Jesus said, **"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. [35] For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. [36] And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. (Matt. 10:34-36).** Many of you have experienced this piercing, this division between family members over who Jesus is. Jesus told us, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. [38] And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me." (Matt. 10:37-38). There is a cost to following Jesus, there is a cross we must bear…one way we bear the cross is through the division that following Jesus will bring. Following Jesus causes you immediately to swim upstream from the family around you. You will be hated by people. You will be cut off from people you thought were your "friends" even "family". ***Jesus is a sword that divides.***

A word of comfort from Peter who experienced this cutting sword in his own life: **"rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.** [Israel was vindicated when the Messiah came, and we too will be vindicated when Jesus comes again…for now we wait] **[14] If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." (1 Peter 4:13-14)]** there is a special blessing for the child of God who faces persecution and division. Peter calls it – "the Spirit of glory and of God resting upon you".

God's presence is known and experienced in a rich and unique way when we face persecution and division for His sake.

In closing, Who do you say Jesus is? To be undecided is to decide. Are you like Cappeau who at one time believed but you have fallen away and need to return to Jesus? Maybe you're like the Jewish composer, indifferent to the lyrics of the song? What about the soldier who saw the birth of Jesus as reason to come out of the trench and stop fighting…stop fighting that individual you seem to constantly be at war with. We don't need to fight anymore! There is a Savior who has ended the war and brings peace and teaches reconciliation! Maybe you've called for a cease fire but the other person hasn't come out of the trench yet…just wait on the Lord. Are you like the professor who felt the most important thing to speak over the radio waves was the Son of God born in the manger? Will you preach Christ and be the light this season to all who are around you?

Maybe you are the one walking on the edge of the fence. You're neutral. You don't want to be for Jesus but you certainly don't want to be against Jesus – I want to tell you something, please listen carefully – You're playing with fire because THE DEVIL OWNS THE FENCE and at any moment you could fall in. If you don't confess Jesus as Lord and Savior you will have none of Him – there's no fence here. There is a sword that divides into "those who fall" and "those who will rise". Don't procrastinate. Today is the day of salvation...this morning just make a step towards God and say, "God if you are real and if

this gospel is the truth will you show me?" I truly believe God will answer that prayer. If you're ready, put your faith in Jesus here and now…don't put it off any further.

Let's pray.