

12/27/2020

## A Sword To Pierce Your Soul

Texts: **Psalm 148; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 2: 22-40**

“A sword to pierce your soul.” That’s a phrase from our gospel reading today, and it’s a phrase that we might easily have passed over without paying it any attention at all in our great eagerness to hear what the aged Simeon and the widow Anna have to say about Jesus. Simeon reveals that Jesus is the hoped for Messiah from God, and that he will be a Savior, not just for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles, that is, for the whole world. Anna praises God and speaks about the child to all who were looking for redemption.

Following the joy of the Christmas story that Luke has just told, with shepherds and choirs of angels marveling and singing at Jesus’ birth, and following our own Christmas celebrations, we’re ready for more rejoicing, so that’s what we hear! But Luke already knows the end of this story that’s he’s telling us, and even here he is preparing us for what will come. Even in the midst of joy, Luke wants us to know that even Jesus and his family, so loved by God, will not be immune from the suffering of ordinary folks.

Eight days after his birth Jesus was circumcised as the law required. Thirty-three days after the birth Mary was to complete the ritual of ceremonial cleansing that the law prescribed for women. Leviticus 12:6 tells us that the new mother should bring a lamb a year old for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering. But that’s not what we hear Mary bringing here! The sacrifice that Mary and Joseph offer is a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” There’s no talk of a year-old lamb in Luke’s gospel. What happened to the lamb? Well, if we read a little further in the Leviticus passage, we find that a woman who is too poor to offer a lamb can offer a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons, which is the very thing Mary and Joseph offered. Jesus was born into such poverty that his family had to offer the smallest amount possible in the law for ritual cleansing. This is just the sort of detail which Luke loves to tell us about in his gospel. Luke shows us that Jesus had a special love for the poor, and now we know why: Jesus grew up in poverty himself!

When we understand the background in which Jesus grew up, we can begin to understand better why he had such sympathy for the poor and the outcasts. Here the greatest gift God ever gave us, the birth of Jesus, is acknowledged with no great sacrifice as the world sees it, but with the smallest of small sacrifices, a pair of pigeons, the best a poor couple could scrape together. Nonetheless, it was a great sacrifice for his parents, who had nothing, and who were actually going to make the greatest sacrifice to God, the death of their son on a cross. But that still lay in the future.

There is, of course, an irony in the situation with the sacrifice here. Jesus was born in a barn and placed in a feeding trough for animals. Then shepherds came to rejoice about his birth at

the instigation of the angels. But now, a month later, his parents can't afford a lamb for a sacrifice. Luke doesn't tell us the story of the wise men as visitors, it's Matthew who does that, so there's no gold or precious spices here that they could trade. In fact, the wise men may have come up to two years later, if you read Matthew closely, and that's why King Herod orders all the boys two years and younger to be killed as he seeks to protect his throne. So that might still lie in the future. And in Luke's telling, the shepherds didn't bring gifts! If only they had brought a lamb! But as it was, they didn't and so Mary and Joseph had to settle for the offering appropriate for the poorest of the poor. That's not the way we expect things to turn out either for the Messiah or for ourselves. The celebration of a birth calls for rejoicing, not for a reminder of how embarrassingly poor we are. Their desperate poverty made what happened next even more surprising for Mary and Joseph. While they were there at the temple, along came Simeon under the direction of the Holy Spirit. And Simeon took the baby up in his arms and started to praise God. He had been waiting for the consolation of Israel because the Holy Spirit had told him that he wouldn't die until he had seen the Messiah. Now he sees Jesus under the direction of the Holy Spirit and he realizes that this child is the Messiah and he rejoices with one of the great speeches of the Bible, known from its Latin translation as the *Nunc dimittis*. "Now you can dismiss your servant in peace," he says, "for my eyes have seen your salvation a light of revelation to the gentiles and further glory for Israel." What a glorious moment in his life! Holding the Messiah in his arms! Assured that this was so by the Holy Spirit! And yet it must have been a bitter-sweet moment for him because the same Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would die right after seeing the Messiah.

While he was rejoicing about the coming of the Messiah, part of him had to be remembering the other half of the Holy Spirit's promise to him, part of him had to be thinking of the *end* of his own life even as he was seeing the *beginning* of the Messiah's life. Maybe that's why he had such a moment of clarity about what Jesus would mean for the world. He doesn't predict sunshine and happiness for this child or for the people he has come to save; instead he sees the ambiguity hidden beneath the joy. It's true that the birth of the Messiah is a matter of great joy for Israel, and for the world. Jesus is salvation and light and revelation and glory, but he is also a stumbling block. Jesus will cause people to fall in Israel as well as to rise. The coming of the Messiah himself will cut some people to the core, Simeon prophesies. The Messiah is a sign from God. But he is a sign which will arouse opposition.

Simeon goes even further. He tells Mary, in her moment of great rejoicing over the announcement that her son is the Messiah, that a sword will pierce her own soul. This child which brings you joy will also bring you cutting sorrow. The encounter with Simeon shows again the ambiguity of life for us all, even for the mother of the Messiah. Who wouldn't want to be the mother of the Messiah? But what if you were told your son would be dead at thirty-three? As a parent, I know exactly what Simeon meant when he said that Jesus would be a sword to pierce Mary's soul. Losing a child would be just that: a sword right through your soul! Mary wanted nothing but the best for her son, but even as Simeon told her that he would be a great person in the life of the nation he also told her that he would bring her great sorrow.

I think some of that sorrow also must have come when Joseph died.

At the beginning of chapter three, just sixteen verses from now, Joseph is no longer a part of the gospel story. Joseph is dead by the time Jesus appears in the wilderness to meet John the Baptist. I wonder what the scene was like in their household the day that he died. What was it like for Mary and Jesus to lose this man? After all, he had come through for Mary when she needed him most, when she had announced that she was pregnant and not by him. He had been a father to Jesus, so much so that nobody in Nazareth ever noticed that Jesus wasn't his own son. When Jesus returns to Nazareth, the townsfolk call him Jesus bar Joseph, Jesus, son of Joseph. What was it like for Jesus to know that he had the power to bring his beloved father Joseph back to life and yet be forbidden to do it? I'm sure that he wept bitterly at the death of his father, just as he would later weep at the death of his friend Lazarus. And he got to bring Lazarus back to life! Was Mary upset at Jesus for not using his power to bring back her husband? Did they quarrel that day to heap sadness upon sadness? No one knows because the Bible doesn't say what happened. In fact, most of the time we just take it for granted that Joseph died and was buried because that's the natural course of things. We never even think of how bitter that day must have been for Jesus and Mary when they knew that it could be different, and yet couldn't make it different because it was not God the Parent's will.

Luke paints us another scene of rejoicing with the arrival of the prophetess Anna. She was eighty-four years old and lived in the temple worshipping God with fasting and prayer night and day. This devout woman knew by the Holy Spirit that the child Jesus was to bring redemption to Israel, and she was happy to tell anyone who would listen. Here surely is a picture of joy. But somehow Luke wants us to see the truth about life again, that there is no one who lives a life untouched by sorrow. This pious woman was a widow. She spent her time night and day in the temple in part because she had nowhere else to be. The tragedy of her story is that she only got to live with her husband for seven years after their marriage before he died. In describing her great joy at the birth of the Messiah, Luke returns to her great sorrow at the death of her husband. She loved him so much that she never remarried, preferring the impoverished solitude and the unprotected danger of a lonely widow over life with a man she didn't love as much as she had loved that first husband of hers. She looked to God for consolation, and to God for protection and a place to live. Our Anna had been widowed some sixty years. What a poignant detail Luke gives to show both sides of life to us.

It's stories like this that make the Bible so real to me. There's no sugar coating of life in the scriptures - life is a combination of joy and sadness. One minute it may be one thing and the next it is another. When we become Christians God doesn't promise us an easy time of life. God doesn't promise to take away everything that can hurt us. God doesn't promise to take away every sadness or wipe away every tear from our eyes, at least not yet. But God does promise to be with us. God does promise to be in the midst of God's suffering people. God does promise to bring comfort to all who trust in God. That's what these stories of Jesus are

trying to tell us: Yes, there will be death, but the Messiah has come, and he will eventually bring life. Yes, there may be loneliness when love dies, but the Messiah has come to show that God's love never dies, and to promise a glorious reunion in the life to come. Yes, the loss of a child is a sword to pierce your soul, but Jesus has come for all the world, and pierced souls can be restored by a loving God who will make all things right in the world to come. *Here*, joy is mingled with sadness, but there, *there* there is only joy, the joy of new birth and new life, the joy of recognition of God in our midst, the joy of reunion forever with those whom we love.

Jesus may be a sword to pierce your soul, but he is also the one who brings healing to that soul, the one who brings salvation. With Simeon and Anna, let us wait with eager expectation for what God is going to do next.

Amen