

“A MIXED BLESSING”

Preached by Rev. Art Litke
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Zion Lutheran Church
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TEXT:

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 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also) so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” Luke 2:34, 35 (ESV)

Today’s Gospel is also the Gospel for the Purification of Mary and the Presentation of Our Lord. It’s the story of Mary and Joseph going to the temple forty days after the birth of Jesus to offer the appointed sacrifices for Mary’s purification after childbirth and the presentation their Firstborn Son to the Lord. This was mandated by the Law of God: *“You shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb. ... Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem”* (Exodus 13:12, 13). The firstborn of animals were to be sacrificed, while the firstborn male children were to spend their lives in the service of the Lord. These children could be “redeemed” by their parents through the appointed sacrifice, and the Levites then served the Lord in their place. This may seem a bit obsessive to us but bear in mind that, in the life of Jesus, the Law of God had to be fulfilled down to the last detail, since fulfilling the Law for man is what He came to do. The specific sacrifice mentioned by Luke in this text—*“a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons”* (Luke 2:24)—is the cheaper option, if you will. This sacrifice was acceptable for new mothers who could not afford the ideal sacrifice: *“a lamb a year old for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering”* (Leviticus 12:7). What all of this means is that Mary and Joseph were poor.

While at the temple Mary and Joseph met Simeon and Anna, who are described, respectively, as *“righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel”* (Luke 2:25) and as one who *“did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day”* (Luke 2:37). The Holy Family received a word of blessing and prophecy. Anna’s words are not given to us, but the words of Simeon, spoken to Mary, are at the same time both encouraging and disturbing. Can you imagine how these words must have made Mary feel? What emotions would arise in your heart if you were told that your newborn son would accomplish great things for the Lord but accomplishing those great things would mean violent

opposition for him and unspeakable grief for you? The words of Simeon to Mary are a mixed blessing indeed—a blessing that reveals three things in particular about the life and ministry that lie ahead for this Child.

The first thing that Simeon says to Mary about her Child is: *“Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel.”* Jesus still is the One who makes the difference between falling and rising, not only in Israel, but universally. The apostle Peter refers to this when He quotes Isaiah and the Psalms and applies them to Jesus. He writes: *“It stands in Scripture: ‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a Stone, a Cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in Him will not be put to shame.’ So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe, ‘The Stone that the builders rejected has become the Cornerstone,’ and ‘A Stone of stumbling, and a Rock of offense.’ They stumble because they disobey the Word”* (1 Peter 2:6-8). When I think of Jesus being the One “appointed for the fall and rising of many,” I am reminded of the crowd at His trial who, when Pilate washed his hands and denied responsibility for a just Man’s death, cried out: *“His blood be on us and on our children!”* (Matthew 27:25). The blood of Jesus is on everyone, since everyone is a sinner and Jesus suffered and died for human sin. For those who believe in Him it is the blood of atonement but for those who do not believe it is the blood of guilt.

The next thing that Simeon says about Jesus is that *“this Child is appointed for ... a Sign that is opposed.”* This is no doubt one of the most obvious characteristics of Jesus’ life and ministry. He was opposed in His conception as relatives and acquaintances no doubted regarded the mother of God to be just another girl who got pregnant out of wedlock. He was opposed in His birth as there was no place found for Him to be born except with the animals. He was opposed in His infancy as Herod the Great tried to kill Him for fear that there might be another “King of the Jews” (Matthew 2:2). He was opposed in the wilderness as Satan used temptation to try to get Him to forsake His mission. He was opposed in His public ministry by those who attributed His preaching to mental instability and His miracles to demonic activity. He was opposed by His own religious leaders—His “pastors,” if you will—who demanded His execution. He was opposed by the combined forces of the Jewish religious establishment and the Roman Empire, who tried to silence His Gospel by persecuting His Church. And can anyone deny that He is still opposed today? You can say or teach just about anything these days, no matter how perverse. It is your “right.” But see what happens when you clearly and boldly proclaim the atoning death of Jesus for the sin of the world. What Paul wrote so many centuries ago is still true today: *“We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles”* (1 Corinthians 1:23).

The third thing that Simeon said was most likely what concerned Mary the most: *“A sword will pierce through your own soul also.”* When the Lord sent His

angel to Mary to tell her about her unique role in salvation history, He gave her a great privilege and a great responsibility. She was to carry inside her and give birth to the one and only Son of God. That would certainly bring her joy and recognition but it would also obligate her to experience all of the emotions that go hand-in-hand with motherhood, including the unspeakable grief that she must have undergone as she witnessed the horrendous death of her Son. It's one thing to lose a child to death; it's quite another to be an eyewitness to your Son's crucifixion. If we are grieved to look upon the suffering of our Savior, imagine how much more intense her grief must have been. Her only comfort is the same comfort that we have: the knowledge that this cruel and painful death means forgiveness and hope for us and for all who are under the curse of sin and death.

Simeon adds, as a final remark, that Jesus will be all of this *“so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”* That also is certainly a mixed blessing. All of our sins laid bare with no excuses, no extenuating circumstances, and no appeals. But this is done so that we might have the full and free forgiveness of those sins through the blood of Jesus. Like the things that Simeon had to say to Mary about Jesus, it's not necessarily pleasant, but is a blessing nevertheless. The manger of Bethlehem always lies in the shadow of the cross of Calvary. It's not easy for us to look at this helpless Baby in the manger and hear the words of the carol ringing in our ears: “Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, The cross be borne for me, for you” (Lutheran Service Book, 370, stanza 2).

But it is a blessing—a blessing for Him because the redemption of the world is His purpose and His glory, and a blessing for us because *“the blood of Jesus [God's] Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 John 1:7). And that is the greatest blessing that we can hope for or imagine!

Amen.

May the true Light which enlightens everyone, which has come into the world, shining brightly in the darkness, be your very life. And may the Word become flesh, Jesus Christ Himself, continue to make known to you His redeeming grace and truth now and always. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it. Amen.