

Christmas Through the Lens of Easter

TEXT: LUKE 2:22-35 (ESV)



Rev. Russ Ramsey
December 21, 2008

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

The Nativity Story

The first chapters of Luke tell the nativity story—the story of Jesus’ birth. In his account, worship plays a significant role. You see it over and over again. Elizabeth worshipped God when she first saw Mary pregnant. Zechariah exalted God when his son John was born. Mary worshipped God when Elizabeth spoke blessings over her. Even the angels praised God when they appeared to the shepherds outside Bethlehem. Today as we read the end of Luke’s nativity story, we see it again.

Over my years of preaching Christmas sermons, I have included the same refrain—a prayer really—that **your celebration of Christmas would be marked by your worship of Jesus**. And this really is my prayer, because we’re missing Christmas if it isn’t—and all we need to do is look at the first Christmas to see the prominent place worship holds in it. Everywhere you turn, the Jesus’ birth draws from men and angels alike a response of adoration and worship. On this last Sunday before Christmas, we’re going to look at the episode where Mary and Joseph bring their son to the temple to offer Him to the Lord as the Law instructs. There’s an old man who has waited his entire life for this moment, and when he finally sees the Christ, he also worships, and he reminds us that if we are to see Christmas rightly, we must see it through the lens of Easter.

Luke 2:22-35

*22*And 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 male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") *24*and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said 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, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. *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. *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,

29"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;

*30*for my eyes have seen your salvation

*31*that 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 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."

The Redemption of Jesus

What were Mary and Joseph doing here? We live in a time that wants to get rid of "meaningless traditions." But we need to take care to distinguish between meaningless traditions and those traditions whose meanings we don't understand because we haven't studied them carefully. Mary and Joseph weren't spiritual renegades. They observed what was written in Scripture, and were making a special journey to Jerusalem to present Jesus to God. And make no mistake; this was an act of worship.

The generations before had taught them well. Joseph and Mary journeyed to the temple for two reasons, both ancient—Mary's purification and the redemption of their first born son from the Lord. To redeem something is to obtain its release by means of a payment. This they were obliged to do with their son before God. Why? Because God said in His Law, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine." (Ex 13:1)

The consecration of the firstborn son was much more than a ritual asking God to give the child a long, happy life. When the Israelites were slaves in Egypt, God peeled back Pharaoh's hold on them one finger at a time, sending ten plagues upon the land. Pharaoh's heart was hard and the first nine couldn't move it. So the last was the worst, the death of the first-born sons. But the Lord gave to Moses a word for Israel. He told them their first-born sons would live if they put the blood of a lamb on their door posts when death passed through the land. (Ex 12:13)

The image was clear and haunting. The angel of death would see the fresh blood glistening on the doorpost and count it as a sign that the people there had already surrendered to God what the angel had come to collect—the first born. God traded the blood of the lamb for the blood of their sons, a life for a life. This was the basis of God's claim of ownership. When the parents sacrificed a lamb on their son's behalf, they forfeited their son's life to God, as did every generation that would follow as the result of that first generation being spared.

From then on, when any first son was born to a descendant of those families, the parents brought that boy to the temple to present him to God because that boy belonged to God. The parents presented him in order to buy him back from God. (Ex 13:13-15) The law stated that a lamb was to be offered as a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtledove was to be offered as a sin offering. Unless the family was poor. If a family couldn't afford a lamb, they could offer two pigeons or turtledoves instead—one as the burnt offering and the other as the sin offering. (Lev 5:7) Joseph and his wife were poor and couldn't afford the lamb the Law preferred. Still, they embraced God's call to redeem their son, which was how they came to be in the temple this day.

Simeon's Unusual Blessing

There was a man named Simeon who was something of a fixture in the temple. He was an old man, and was known to everyone there as the minister who was waiting to behold the Messiah Who would be the consolation of his people. The Lord had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah with his own eyes. When Simeon saw Mary and the child in her arms, the Holy Spirit awakened in him an excitement which must have brought his aged heart to the point of bursting. This baby was **the One**. And though God promised Simeon would see the Christ, on this day, God did him one better. Simeon got to actually **hold** the Christ.

I try to imagine what that was like. When our son was born, our families were in the waiting room. As I came down the hallway with this bundled up little stranger in my arms and introduced Christopher Richard Ramsey to his grandparents, I could not convey, not even through my tears, the extent of the joy I felt beholding that life in that moment. I imagine this is similar to what Simeon felt upon seeing Jesus.

Mary and Joseph weren't expecting Simeon. And his blessing wasn't the standard fare either. Most blessings are marked by warm petitions for happiness and success in life. Simeon's blessing was not a petition at all. It was a proclamation. He was not asking for what could be. He was declaring what is! Every word spoke to this child's *purpose*. There was something this child had come to do. They had brought Jesus here to this place to redeem him, but now before them stood a man proclaiming that this baby would, in fact, redeem *them*.

As his words began to register, Mary and Joseph marveled at what he said. This moment was a meeting of hearts—something of an exhale. For Simeon, the white hot passion for seeing the Messiah was exposed now and beginning to die out. For Joseph, the unfinished business of his inability to purchase the best for Mary's cleansing didn't bother him anymore. And for Mary, at last someone else seemed to know all about what the angel had told her about this boy's purpose. The old man's confirmation came as a great relief. This was a happy moment.

Through The Lens of Easter

But Simeon's smile slowly began to level off. The joy never left his eyes, but he became very serious. There was more to say because there was more to this little life than met the eye. All Simeon had said so far was what Jesus would do. Now it was time to broach the subject of *how*. He began to tell Mary a truth she must have already had some sense of as well: Jesus would turn the world on its ear. And it would come at a great cost. Her baby would facilitate the ruin of many in Israel. Like a stump from Jesse's root, he would jut out and break the toes of any who tread lightly on the purpose for which He had come.

Jesus would reveal the hearts of all mankind. The light of the world will shine in every dark corner of every dark heart, exposing every dark secret. And this is a world which has grown fond of its darkness. So it should not come as a surprise that He will be opposed. ^(Lk 2:34) Simeon tells her all these things. But she can't help suspecting that he's been pulling his punches so far. There is something else on his mind, something behind his eyes. Something more pointed—pointed at her.

And she's right. There is something he must say—something that will land like a punch not pulled. But it must be said, and he is the one appointed to say it. So Simeon levels his brow to look directly into the young mother's eyes; "*Mary, what awaits your son will be like a sword that will pierce through your soul.*"

If Mary kept things spoken of Jesus in her heart, this must have been one of them. A sword would pierce her soul. It was the price of being the mother of Jesus. She had to raise this baby knowing He belonged to God and had come for the purpose of saving people from sin. And everything in her history told her sin offerings were a bloody business.

Thirty three years later, she would find herself at the foot of the cross on which her Son hung. With her own two eyes, she would watch Him die—despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Her heart would be pierced by the suffering and rejection He'd take during His short life. Is this, she wondered, what it takes to console a nation? Could *she* ever be consoled after something like this? Would this turn out to be the very thing, the *only* thing to console her?

If her Son was the salvation of Israel, He was her savior too. There was purpose behind everything her Son ever did, a purpose He was singularly devoted to. It was in His words. It was in His ways. Even the events of the week leading up to this moment seemed suspiciously deliberate, as though no one was taking anything from Him, but He was in fact laying down His life of His own accord and with all authority. That cross seemed to cast a shadow which reached all the way back to that day when Mary met the old man in the temple. When Jesus offered up His life, He was not simply dying. He was *doing* something.

Luke ends his nativity under the shadow of the cross; dwelling on the purpose of Christ's coming. It is the end by which He'd console Israel. This is why the presence of Jesus through this entire story evoked just **ONE** response—whether by Elizabeth when she saw Mary pregnant, or by the angels who appeared to the shepherds to announce His birth or by Simeon upon seeing Jesus in the temple. Each responded in **WORSHIP**. May God so work in our hearts that we observe Christmas always under the shadow of the cross—and **WORSHIP** Christ as the result.

Notes
