

A Sword Through the Soul

Thomas Robinson, December 5, 2010

Luke 2:22-38

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*” [Exodus 13:2]) 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.*” [Leviticus 12:8]

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** [Jeremiah 31:7-13], 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*, [Isaiah 42:6; 49:6]
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*.”

³⁶ And there was a **prophetess**, **Anna**, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the **temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day**. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to **give thanks to God** and to **speak of him** to all who were waiting for the **redemption of Jerusalem**. [Isaiah 52:7-9; Psalm 130]

Luke 2:8-14

⁸ And in the same region there were **shepherds out in the field**, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And **an angel of the Lord** appeared to them, and the **glory of the Lord** shone around them, and they were **filled with fear**.

¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “***Fear not***, for behold, I bring you ***good news of great joy*** that will be for ***all the people***. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a ***Savior***, who is ***Christ*** the ***Lord***. ¹² And this will be a ***sign for you***: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a ***manger***.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a **multitude of the heavenly host praising God** and saying,

¹⁴ “***Glory to God*** in the highest,
and on earth ***peace***
among those with whom he is pleased!”

The Long Wait

Luke wants us to know that Jesus' story is not only something new, but very old. It is not a new religion or philosophical idea but the unfolding of the ancient story of Israel and all the world. Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to temple for dedication, a rite symbolizing a whole people shaped by deliverance and dedicated to God. The sacrifice of the poor.

In the Temple – grand, beautiful, wealthy, powerful, built by Herod the Great – the young couple and baby encounter Simeon and Anna, two elderly people who embody the long story. They go back before Herod swept through. They are rooted in the long times of expectation, disappointment, and hope: *“the consolation of Israel,” “the redemption of Jerusalem.”* Some would look at the temple and say all was good, they knew better. Israel was still in exile, the nations still in darkness. Broken people, broken nations. Their only peace was Roman conquest. Israel's glory was a temple built on bloodshed.

But then one day the prophetic Spirit led Simeon to the temple and he saw a month-old baby in the arms of a poor couple, like so many others, but he knew! Imagine the meeting.

A New World Coming

Luke lets us hear Simeon's words so we can see beneath the surface through Simeon's eyes. *Peace:* The fulfillment of God's promise to him to see the Lord's Anointed – God's king, the overthrow of the propaganda of Rome, Herod, Powers that be. But that meant more!

In this obscure child he sees God's way of preparing deliverance right in front of everybody, for and against all people. Peoples discover in him salvation they needed but didn't know. Starting from this point in widening circles, Israel's glory is realized in the Messiah. Israel's Messiah stands as a beaming light for all nations – the promise to Abraham. God's work has always been about the healing and renewal of all of God's creation.

A Sword Through the Soul

Mary and Joseph are astonished. But there is more to be said. Simeon looks at Mary. What begins here is a long battle fought out in every life. This child /Anointed king has a claim on every life, the embodiment of God's salvation, promises, light. We fall or rise by our response to him. We can't be neutral to one who claims us completely. That means a battle in souls and lives. But God does not invade with nuclear conquest, but in a child, a sign that can be rejected. He allows every heart to reveal its inmost desires. He fights with the weapon of self-giving love, but life and death is at stake.

No one is immune. *“A great sword will go through even your soul, Mary.”* Mary's experience is unique, but also the same as others. Jesus brings a piercing, revealing, dividing, pruning sword – the claim of the creator on his creation. Only when the battle has been fought, only when love and trust conquers can there be peace.

Peace in the Midst

The Angels announce Peace on Earth. But it is an army of Angels that announces it. Like Israel and Jerusalem we are still in exile in the midst of the gold and marble of our self-glorifying constructions. Simeon opens our eyes to see through the surface to reality.

Anna call us to embrace this wonderful, dangerous, life-transforming baby with thanksgiving and to speak of him to all the exiles who surround us, resisting, waiting for redemption.