

“A SIGN THAT WILL BE OPPOSED”

Luke 2:22-40

A Sermon by John Thomason

Woodbury UMC

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For preachers who intended to fuss at their congregations today about the dangers of a commercialized Christmas, it's too late. The credit card statements are already pouring in! Actually, I've never been one to criticize the merchants and holiday shoppers. In my opinion, a commercialized Christmas may be in wretched taste, but at least it doesn't pretend to be anything else. What is really dangerous is a sentimentalized Christmas. Sentimentality is an emotion that doesn't arise out of the truth, but which is poured on top, like pouring water into egg nog, thus diluting and distorting. At some point each Christmas we need to come to our senses and distinguish mere sentiment from real fact.

Bill Leonard is an old friend of mine who recently retired from teaching at a seminary in North Carolina. When Bill was in graduate school he served as the student pastor of a small Congregational church here in New England. One Christmas Eve, the church was predictably packed for a candlelight service. Being a novice worship leader, Bill wanted very much for the occasion to be well-orchestrated and meaningful. For a while, he got his wish. Snow fell outside, as if on cue, in crisp winter air. Advent candles flickered off stained glass in a white-framed meetinghouse which was over a hundred years old. It was every young minister's dream of a picture post card Christmas Eve. The whole setting was saturated with warmth and joy, serenity and beauty.

The candlelight service went smoothly up until the time Bill rose to bring his well-prepared homily on hope, love, and the Christ Child. He was barely into the sermon when off to one side in the dimly lighted church he heard a scuffling and a sigh. He turned to watch as the daughter of a beloved church member experienced an unexpected seizure. Bill confessed that his first response was a silent prayer of frustration: “O Lord, not now, not during my nice sermon in my nice church, and not on Christmas Eve!” But there in the middle of that idyllic worship service came evidence of the harsh realities of life: fear, hurt, and suffering. The scene that night was both picturesque and grotesque. Perhaps this is the unsentimental truth about Christmas: God's coming into the world is not neat and orderly and painless. Christmas joy is often mixed with sadness, and pleasure with trauma – as if you and I needed any reminder of that during this very COVID Christmas.

This is certainly how it is on that first Christmas when Jesus is born to Mary and Joseph. Our conventional picture of that event is truly picturesque: shepherds huddled on a hillside, angels singing in the heavens, Jesus asleep in the manger. Luke's story includes all the elements that make it easy to sentimentalize Christmas. But notice that the Christmas story doesn't end there. Luke ushers us quickly from the manger in Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem, from the birth of Jesus to the early days of his infancy. The great miracle has been accomplished, and a note of realism and normalcy is now added to the story. We're indebted to Luke for a text that speaks to us after the shepherds, angels, and heavenly hosts are gone. Mary and Joseph have a son to rear, religious obligations to keep, and a trip back to Nazareth to make.

Sometime after Jesus is circumcised, his parents go up to Jerusalem, where in obedience to the law, they fulfill two Jewish customs. First, Mary offers a sacrifice of birds for her own purification. Then she and Joseph formally dedicate their firstborn to God. There in the temple two pious old Jews, Simeon and Anna, see the baby Jesus and recognize in him the fulfillment of their hopes. Simeon takes Jesus into his arms and praises him as the agent of God's salvation, as “a light . . . to the Gentiles” and a “glory . . . to Israel” (Luke 2:30-32). So far, Simeon sounds downright sentimental, fawning over an infant and declaring his greatness. But in his next breath, the old man introduces a sharp note of reality. Simeon is able to look

beyond the baby and catch a glimpse of Jesus when he is fully grown. He foresees that Jesus will be a center of controversy, the occasion for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and a cause of piercing grief to his mother (vv. 34-35).

Now think back: in Luke's familiar Christmas story, the shepherds go to Bethlehem looking for a "sign" – a sign of Israel's salvation, a sign of God's presence and power in the world. As it turns out, the sign they see is not a thing of power. God doesn't come into history wearing a crown or rattling a saber. The sign is nothing more than a "child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (2:12). The sign given at Bethlehem isn't flashy and bold and intrusive, like a gaudy neon sign on the Las Vegas strip. This sign is humble and gentle, weak and vulnerable.

Now old Simeon, like the shepherds before him, recognizes this sign as he holds the baby in his arms. It is still a sign of innocence and peace. Who could be offended or threatened by such a helpless infant? But Simeon can see that the child who was born in Bethlehem will grow up into a man whose spiritual mission is to turn the world upside down. As a consequence, Jesus will no longer be a sign of consolation; he will be a sign of trouble – what the late John Lewis called "good trouble" – but still, trouble. Jesus is "a sign that will be opposed" (v. 34).

All of this Simeon reports to Mary herself, who must be stunned and frightened by the revelation. Here in the temple, she has no time to be sentimental about her baby's birth, for now she knows about his controversial life and tragic death. Motherhood, of course, begins in pain, and for Mary it begins also in poverty and loneliness. But the greater pain is that which is yet to come, as she sees her son go out into a life full of risk and danger, moving toward a catastrophe that she doesn't fully understand and cannot prevent.

My late aunt, Frances Ingraham, lost her only son in a farming accident back in 1974 when he was only 17. Reflecting on Hal's incomplete life and untimely death, she used to tell my mother, "Beverly, I'm so grateful that the Lord gave us the gift of memory, not the gift of foresight."

Mary received both gifts, and one of them was a sack of ashes. It must be a terrifying thing to know ahead of time about the suffering of your own child. Certainly at one level all of us do know. We know that in every great joy there is potential for pain. In anything new or exciting – a new job, a new marriage, or a new offspring – there is both promise and peril. If you are a parent, you know in advance that pitfalls lie in the path of your child. You don't know what they are, but you do know that they are. And you know that when your child stumbles and falls, his or her pain will also be your pain. When you invest love in another human being, sooner or later you're going to get hurt. You are vulnerable because your loved one is vulnerable – vulnerable to injury and disease, temptation and failure.

Like generations before us, we often ponder the mystery of suffering. We wonder especially why bad things happen to good people. But it's really not that hard to figure out. Ironically, the best people in the world are the ones who are most vulnerable to suffering. Those who are most sensitive and responsive to the pain of others are the ones most likely to feel pain themselves. Those individuals who stand for something worthy and enduring, who lay their lives on the line for their neighbors, who seek to bring healing, speak truth, and do justice, are the ones most likely to lose their lives. The Bible calls those kind of people "prophets." Today, we've given them another name – we call them "frontliners."

One of my favorite modern parables is Martin Bell's "What the Wind Said to Thajir." Thajir is a little boy with an enthusiasm for the great outdoors. One day on a walk, he is addressed by the wind. The wind shares with Thajir three important secrets about life. First, says the wind, "Everything that is, is good." Second, "You are everyone who ever was and everyone who ever will be. Anything that hurts anyone, hurts you. Anything that helps anyone, helps you." Third, says the wind to Thajir, "It is in dying that one lives. One finds life by losing it in sacrificial love. The meaning and purpose of life," says the wind, "is grasped in the process of dying on behalf of the world."

After hearing these three secrets, Thajir is able to repeat them back to the wind. What's more, the little boy shows remarkable understanding and acceptance of these truths. After he is certain that the wind is gone, he returns home. The story ends this way:

“That night, Thajir’s mother read him a story about elephants. After she had finished reading him the story, she asked him what he remembered about it. Thajir said it was most important to remember that whatever hurt elephants hurt him, and that whatever helped elephants helped him. He added that, at the center of things, life belonged to life, and this meant that he and the elephants shared in the same experience and were somehow united with one another. He went on to say that it was good to be an elephant, and it was good to be Thajir.

“Thajir’s mother did not question what he said. It was not the answer that she expected, but it was a fine answer. Being an exceedingly wise woman, she let it go at that, closed the book about elephants, and tucked Thajir into bed. For a moment she stared at the little boy who was already asleep. ‘I’m afraid for him,’ she said through unanticipated tears. ‘O God, I’m afraid for him! What will become of my Thajir?’ Naturally, there was no reply. No sound at all outside, in the darkness, only the howling of the wind.”

It’s a terrifying thing to anticipate ahead of time the suffering of your own child, to realize that he or she is thoughtful enough, caring enough, and committed enough to be easily hurt, to make enemies, even to die a premature death.

Luke tells us that Jesus’ father and mother “were amazed at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul, too’” (vv. 34-35). I know you’re not expecting this, but do you see how the shadow of the cross falls even before the brightness of his birth?

In Christian art, there are two well-known pictures, each with the same title, “The Shadow of the Cross.” One by Holman Hunt represents the interior of a carpenter’s shop, with Joseph and the boy Jesus at work. Mary is also present. The boy Jesus pauses in his work, and as he stretches himself, the shadow of the cross is formed on the wall. The other picture is a popular engraving which depicts the infant Jesus running with outstretched arms to his mother, the shadow of the cross being cast by his form as he runs. Both pictures are fanciful, but their underlying idea is assuredly true. If we read the Gospels just as they stand, it’s clear that the death of Christ is in view almost from the outset of his earthly appearance. At first sight there seems to be little in the opening chapters about his death. But as we look deeper – through the eyes of Simeon, for example – we see more. The cross is a part of the divine purpose for Jesus from the very beginning.

Because this is so, the Christ of Christmas is far more than “the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.” His coming brings divine judgment upon our values and priorities, upon our selfishness and pretense. Jesus doesn’t come to earth to play it safe and win popularity contests. He comes to “speak the truth in love” and to endure the consequences. It’s no wonder that Jesus doesn’t die in a bed.

In response to such sacrificial love, you and I cannot remain neutral. Old Simeon was right: in the presence of Christ, the inner thoughts of our hearts are revealed. We’re either for him or against him; before him we either rise or fall. You and I can dwell on the baby Jesus and let Christmas be an escape from the adult realities of life. But we do so at the risk of missing the true Jesus.

Some of you have heard me share my favorite poem about Christmas, which was written by Andrew Blackwood, Jr. It’s worth sharing again in this context. For those of you who haven’t heard it, I must give you a “spoiler alert”: it is not a sentimental poem.

“Jesus, what have you done to us?
we wanted a pet kitten
and you turned into a tiger
we liked the way you were
why couldn't you leave us alone?
We wanted you to show up when we wanted
you to make us feel good
We wanted a pretty church for weddings and
baptisms and funerals
We wanted the cute Easter bunny hopping
around the lawn
We thought religion is good for the kiddies.
Now all of a sudden you've turned against us.
We wanted peace but you brought us a sword.
Things were going along all right.
then you got interested in the poor people
now they're strutting around like they are
going to inherit the earth.
Now all of a sudden you tell us to love our enemies.
Do you know what will happen if we do?
They will nail our hide to the wall and what
will we do then, keep on praying for them?
We liked you when you were a little boy
gentle, meek and mild.
cooing in your cradle
all those nice shepherds and angels
and we felt just awful about King Herod.
Look at all we did for you.
We made a national holiday in your honor.
We built big industries around it
Christmas cards, toy machine-guns for
the kiddies, all those fancy gift-wrapped
whiskey bottles.
We built pretty churches in your honor
stained glass, organs, the works,
And when the people moved away from the
riffraff
the church followed them
straight into the suburbs.
Look at all we've done for you, Jesus
why can't you leave us alone?
We've got enough troubles now
why do you keep poking us in the conscience?
What do you want, our hearts?