

Sermon for Christmass 1 – Luke 2:33-40

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

According to St. Luke, Christmas concludes in the temple—in the institutional church as we could call it. The baby Jesus was brought there for the Service of Presentation forty days after His birth. From ancient times, the Church has celebrated this event on February 2nd, forty days after Christmas, about a month from now. Today the first Sunday after Christmas, however, we ponder the prophetic words spoken after our Lord's presentation in the temple, words spoken by Simeon that point forward to what lies ahead for the Christ child's career: "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ... so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

What does this mean? Simeon says that Jesus is the touchstone of men's receiving or rejecting God. Once again this Christmas, St. Luke has extolled Mary's baby as the Son of God. Gabriel told Mary she would have a son and Elizabeth greeted Mary as the mother of her Lord. Zechariah blessed God for the fulfillment of His promises and for John who would "go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways." Just days ago the angels proclaimed the birth of "a Savior which is Christ the Lord."

The shepherds went with haste at the angel's promise of a Savior in the City of David. Shockingly, what they found was a baby in a manger. This child was a sign, even as Simeon said. In the Bible a sign often means something that contains and conveys what God is doing and what God is giving. At the same time a sign hides under what appears to be its opposite. The ultimate example of the Biblical sign is the cross. You see a man dying. But what remains hidden in the cross is all men being made alive. The disclosure of a sign is by a word of God, which requires hearing and receiving, that is, faith. God's dealing with us in this way reduces us to the point of which we're nothing but receivers. The shepherds received the words of the angel and embraced the baby in the manger as the Savior who is Christ the Lord. All of these characters, from Mary to the shepherds, would correctly receive God through Jesus.

Simeon also received a word from God. He would not die until he saw the Messiah. Each day Simeon grew older and older, yet he clung to God's word. When the sign of Mary's baby came to the temple, Simeon rejoiced. Two inseparable messages were contained in the sign of the infant Lord. Two inseparable messages for Simeon, the aged saint. The first message: "now you will die." And the second message: "this is your Savior." It's just that simple: a baby boy from a poor family is the sign of Simeon's death and salvation. Simeon looked at his life and his death through the sign of the Christ child and departed in peace. For Simeon, this child was appointed for his falling and rising.

Simeon spoke his prophecy to Mary. Her child was also a sign of her falling and rising. Mary had to learn that she had a son, yet she did not have Him—He really had her. To receive the sign of her son meant Mary had to suffer loss. Simeon told her of a sword that would pierce her heart, and our hearts turn to the mother fallen at the foot of the cross of her Lord and of her son. Remember, a sign appears as the opposite of what it contains and conveys. The sign hidden in its opposite is on the arms of the cross and in the arms of Simeon. Jesus is God's salvation for fallen men. And God's way of giving this sign can only be received in the same lowly way. In that lowliness there is great mercy. We are unable to pull ourselves up to a level at which we become worthy of God dealing with us. But also there is not a point below God's lowliness where we can fall beneath His reach. We

are lost by refusing this lowliness, thinking it is an insult to our pride or insisting that God deal with us in ways that give us only personal honor and no shame. We want a god who will serve our purposes and meet our specifications.

Mary cried for her son in the stable. She cried for Him at Calvary with tears that washed away any of her demands or her insistence. When Mary was completely crushed, when a sword went through her soul, she was raised up. For Mary and for Simeon, Jesus was a sign for falling and rising. For many in Israel, He was only a sign for falling. In their response to Jesus, the Jews and Pharisees showed who they were. The thoughts of their hearts were revealed. He did not meet their self-honoring specifications. They had no use for such a lowly, such a weak, such a defeated Messiah. They wanted someone useful for their social, political, and religious purposes. For these, one needs power.

Mary's baby had power enough, but the power was hidden beneath its opposite. Jesus wins victories not by exercising power, but by suffering death. His greatest victory is hidden under the opposite. The King on a donkey had His throne on a cross. Many in Israel spoke against this sign. They stumbled and fell. "Immanuel" means "God with us." When God is with us, when He deals with us, it is judgment and salvation, falling and rising, or it is only falling and then only judgment.

When God deals with us, we are shown who we really are. When God deals with us, the thoughts of our hearts are revealed. If we cling to these thoughts, to our insistence about God and what He must produce for us, we are undone and remain under judgment. If we are shown who we are (sinners) and come clean in repentance, we receive the gifts of salvation that raise us up. These gifts come in the unlikely sign of the helpless infant in Simeon's arms, the sign of the Man dying on the cross, and the reality of Christ's Body and Blood found in bread and wine. We receive the body and blood of Christ hidden in the lowly forms of bread and wine. God's messengers disclosed what was hidden in Mary's baby. Christ's own words disclose what is hidden in the bread and wine. We fall in repentance; we are raised by forgiveness and made alive.

Simeon embraced the Savior in the sign of the baby that brought him his death and his salvation. We embrace the Savior in the sign of this Sacrament where the thoughts of our own hearts are made clear. This sign means death to us in our self-affirmations and demands of God. But it also means our rising, for we are joined more closely with Christ and share His life, which no swords-through-our-souls nor anything else can ever destroy. All this we rejoice in as we unite in heaven's hymn and Simeon's Song. We sing it as we depart from the Sacrament of the Altar. May we be so blessed to have this song upon our lips when we depart this life as well: "Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people..." Rejoice in the Savior in whom we have our falling and rising, our dying and our living, our death and our salvation. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠