

Today we get what would normally be celebrated on Feb 2--40 days after Jesus' birth. It's Jesus in the Temple, greeted by the O.T. saints of Simeon and Anna. Both had been waiting for Jesus' birth. Both also knew that once He came, the world would be very disturbed, and would attack both the child and those who followed Him. The message that Simeon delivers seems completely out of step with Christmas, or at least with how we tend to view Christmas. So, let's not jump into this feet first, because it can feel like doing a polar plunge.

Instead, let's start slowly and in a friendly and even in a kind of chatty way...how was your Christmas?

I don't really expect you to answer me, but I do want you to think about how your day went. What was it like?

Did you enjoy yourself? Was it filled with family and the excitement of kids? Did you get together with friends or at least connect with them?

If we were to characterize our celebrations with the shepherds and angels, the celebrations with kids would be like the shepherds running to the manger. Breathless. Full of energy. Whereas, those of you without children or grandchildren, it might have been more like the angels' message. Peace.

That's what it was like for Joanne and I. It was nice and quiet. I'm sure kids wouldn't understand how that could be enjoyable. But we appreciated it. Not a whole lot of presents, except several from you guys, so thank you, but not a whole lot otherwise, but that's because we'll be giving each other smallish gifts through the 12 days of Christmas. A nice, quiet day, making several phone calls and then spending time together.

We had Christmas music going. It was actually on TV, channel 45, called Yule Log with a fireplace on the screen and Christmas music continuously playing. I know we could have found any number of different sources for our music, but I sort of bet Joanne that Yule Log really was just a fireplace and she took it. So, I proved my point, and then we just left it on.

It had an incredibly small loop of songs--apparently ones that would cost the least in royalties. I didn't realize how small that loop was, until I realized we had heard, "I want a Hippopotamus for Christmas" at least four times. That was when we decided it was time to find something else. But it was a nice day. Maybe not getting together with family and friends, but still, as I had said, connecting with them.

Family and friends is the world's understanding of what Christmas is all about. Family and friends are great. These are gifts from our gracious Father, but this isn't what Christmas is about.

We gravitate toward this understanding, because it's nice and it's comfortable and it's what the world wants Christmas to be about. And we willingly go along with it, because it makes us feel warm inside--at least for those who do have family and friends to celebrate it with.

For those who don't, this holiday is especially hard, because family and friends have become almost the sole meaning of Christmas. Everyone, including the Church, picks up on this message making it even harder for those who don't have these gifts.

We do them and ourselves a serious disservice when we adopt the world's understanding. As sinners, we naturally drift in this direction toward an understanding of glory, toward thinking Christmas is about making things good here on earth.

We pick up on the angels song about peace, and think it's talking about peace on earth. Yes, the angels did say peace on earth, but not between men. Jesus demolished that misunderstanding when He corrected His disciples. "I did not come to bring peace on the earth but a sword."

But, but, but...what about the angels' song?

Has it occurred to you that we may have been misunderstanding what the angels were saying? I picked on the hymn, "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear" earlier in Advent because it gets the angels' message wrong. If you look at what the hymn is saying, it's talking about peace on earth between men, and that men merely need to listen to the angel's song.

No, that's not what the angels meant. The peace which the angels sang about was between us and God, and it would hardly be won peacefully. It would take the Lamb of God pouring out His blood.

And this is where the world goes in a direction, we don't dare follow. The world would not have a Savior who dies to reconcile sinners. The world shows itself to be the enemy of the Church and the Cross. As Paul said to the Corinthians, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved the word of the cross is the power of God."

To correct this drift, the Church adopted the practice of observing on the first three days of the 12 days of Christmas, martyrs' days. Yesterday was St. Stephen, the first martyr of the Church, as recorded in Acts 8. He was willing to be martyred, and actually was. Today is St. John, Evangelist and Apostle. He was willing to be martyred, but it didn't happen to him. Tomorrow is the Holy Innocents of Bethlehem. They were actually martyred for the sake of Christ, but it wasn't that they were willing to do this. It was forced on them by Herod's soldiers as they ripped these children from their horrified mothers and put them to the sword.

Now, unlike as when we first started, Simeon's prophecy no longer sounds so out of step with the Christmas message. Now, we're ready to consider what he said, because he talks about the fall and rising of many, the sign spoken against, a sword piercing Mary's soul, and the exposing of what is actually in people's hearts.

Simeon's prophecy is like the angels' announcement. He speaks and then we see a reaction from Anna. The angels made their announcement and then the shepherds reacted. It's like Simeon is the Christmas angels and Anna like the shepherds.

As we have already heard, Simeon talked about things that were not so pleasant. He did talk about the rising of many. This is what John had said in chap.1 but to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God for those who He was in the world. But, ..., but just as John had said right before this, although the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. Jesus' own people would reject Him. The bulk of Simeon's message explained the resistance Jesus' followers found. A sign spoken against, the exposure of what people really thought, and a sword piercing Mary's soul.

First that sword pierced through the fake religious leaders. Like Heb 4 says, “the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

We saw the ones who were so respected, so respectable, throwing themselves against the stone of Christ and getting absolutely crushed. (Ps 118) Those religious leaders who talked a good game, hated the Gospel. They hated Jesus. And they hated those who followed Him.

And imagine how that was for Mary, Jesus’ mother to see her son, so abused. The sword that pierced her heart would take many forms, but this was one that would particularly be hard for a mother to take. But also Jesus correcting her when she thought family ought to trump everything else, when she presumed on her status as His mother to get Jesus to do His first public miracle, and when Jesus corrected her misunderstanding about what was truly family. How that must have been more than just a sting, but a sword to have her own self-chosen spirituality pierced, because after all she was a sinner like us.

As much as Simeon’s hurt, they were true. They didn’t give a rosy picture, but they gave a trustworthy one, one that lets us know resistance is not to be considered strange or unexpected.

The angels spoke of peace, but they also said how peace would be achieved. A Savior has been born to you in the city of David, who is Christ the Lord. A Savior.

Now, a savior to be a savior must save. He must rescue those who are captive. The one holding us captive, isn’t going to cut us loose without a fight, though. And even after he had been defeated, he won’t quit until our Lord returns visibly and sets everything right again. Until then, the angel’s message still stands, “A Savior, who is Christ the Lord, who brings peace to those with whom God has found favor.”

The shepherds didn’t understand everything that was happening or that the angels were saying, but they heard angels speaking to them, and knew this wasn’t something to be ignored. So, they jumped up and ran to find the child.

When they found exactly what the angels had said, they could not be stopped. A bouncy, bubbly buoyancy, they told anyone who would listen, and it wasn't just that night. They kept speaking of it.

As these shepherds brought their sheep to the temple, you can imagine that they spoke of it there. The priests and the Levites heard the message that the Messiah had been born. The news was heard throughout the whole temple and the precincts. Undoubtedly, it reached Herod's palace, but he had heard of other Messiahs because the time had been ripe for Messiahs rising, so he didn't pay too much attention...yet.

Meanwhile, the shepherds glorified and praised God as they spoke of what they had heard and seen. They told their children, and they spoke of it to their grandchildren. They could not be stopped. They knew what was true. And no matter what reaction they would get from the people they told, they knew it was still true and needed to be told. This was news that could not be kept from being told.

And now enter the second aged saint in our reading, Anna. Whether she had heard Simeon's actual words or just heard what others reported that he had said, she responded like the shepherds. She could not be stopped. She had been praying for this day. Not just praying, she fasted and prayed daily for exactly what she had heard had been fulfilled.

She wasn't alone. In the capital city of Jerusalem, the stronghold of the Pharisees and Saducees, the stronghold of fake religiosity, there were those who were truly devout. They yearned for the Messiah. They prayed for the one who would come and set them free. They prayed with earnestness. It consumed their prayers. As they prayed for others, the Advent of the Messiah was foremost in their minds. They heard the prophets. The prophets had all pointed to His arrival, and they longed for the fulfillment of their words.

Isaiah had even spoken of these faithful people. In that day the Lord of hosts will be a crown of glory, and a diadem of beauty, to the remnant of his people. Those who remained faithful. The remnant.

Luke calls them "those who looked for the redemption of Jerusalem." For them the Lord of hosts was a crown of glory and a diadem of beauty. They weren't looking merely for Jerusalem to be released from Roman rule. No, Jerusalem's captivity was deeper than that. They prayed for the man who would enter the strong man's house and plunder his

goods as Peter speaks of Jesus and Satan in Mark 3 and is described in two other gospels. They prayed for the one who would pay the ransom price. They prayed for the one who would shed His blood for them and all people, just like all the animals whose blood was shed in the temple.

They weren't scared off by what Simeon had said. They saw all the sacrifices. They knew it would take the shedding of blood. They knew the strong man overcome by the stronger man would not quit. They knew this is what comes. The prophecy in the garden spoke of the enmity between the woman's seed and Satan's seed. It wouldn't be without resistance from the devil and the world, but it was peace between them and God, to be achieved by this little child.

I don't think it needs to be said, but Anna, this remnant, and the shepherds are a model for us. Their undimmed enthusiasm, despite the clear knowledge of resistance, stands here for us.

The world, my friends, is not our friend. We can't follow its direction. It will resist us. That means nothing. Our Lord has conquered it, so we can freely speak of what we know is true.

We speak it to our children, our grandchildren, and to any who will hear. We speak it to one another, as we sing hymns, as we confess our faith, as we speak "amens," to the prayers. But that's only part of it. We also console one another with the news, when we have the chance, especially when we feel the resistance. We do as that remnant consoled one another with their news. We could even encourage one another to stay faithful in our prayers for the fulfillment of the day of the Lord when we will see Him with our own eyes. And in this way we become like the shepherds who proclaimed God's glory and spoke of it to any who would hear and listen. AMEN