



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



Simeon's Simple Startling Song

Text: Luke 2:25-35

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During this season I have been preaching about the Christmas story from Luke and I've said that the story is told between four different songs which explain what is going on. We jump from Mary's Song to Zechariah's Song, to the Song of the Angels and ends with the Song of Simeon.

All the songs are, in some very significant way, very poignant, but Simeon's may be the most. Luke tells us that Simeon was a man who had been promised by God that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph take Jesus and they see Simeon and Simeon sees Jesus, his words, "Master you are now dismissing your servant in peace," takes on a monumental meaning. Simeon is not getting dismissed from school or from church; he's being dismissed from life. In this incredible little scene, we see an elderly prophet and a baby and even the coldest heart could melt.

But...

There is a transition here. Up to now Christmas has been about the celebration of the birth of a baby. Jesus came into the world as a baby and the story is such a heart warming event. But Simeon's song moves away from talking about a baby and reminds us that the story of Christmas is a whole lot less about the baby and a whole lot more about the coming of the Messiah----who will become an adult. It is an encounter of the adult Messiah at Christmas. And it's not all fun.

Simeon says several potent things.

First he says that:

"The child is destined to be the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed."

It is a reminder statement to the parents and a reminder to us that Jesus is accepted by some, rejected by others, and understood completely by no one.

Jesus was and is a sign who is opposed. The coming of the Messiah does not mean that

everything is going to be fine and dandy. The coming of the Messiah brings great complications and will force people to make choices.

An elder Cherokee chief took his grandchildren into the forest and sat them down and said to them, "A fight is going on inside me. This is a terrible fight and it is a fight between two wolves. One wolf is the wolf of fear, anger, arrogance and greed. The other wolf is the wolf of courage, kindness, humility and love." The children were very quiet and listening to their grandfather with both their ears.

He then said to them, "This same fight between the two wolves that is going on inside of me is going on inside of you, and inside every person." They thought about it for a minute and then one child asked the chief, "Grandfather, which wolf will win the fight?"

He said quietly, "The one you feed."

The coming of the Messiah is a coming that requires people to make choices. Some back then would follow Jesus, some would not.

Some people will follow noble and good paths; some will not. As the old Cherokee grandfather said, it's the wolf we choose to feed.

Simeon was stating, quite bluntly, that Jesus, as the Messiah, would cause division not by his own doing but by forcing people to make choices. It is a choice we all, at some point, have to make. Are we following Jesus, or not.

Secondly, Simeon tells Mary that a sword would pierce her soul. It was like telling her that her the result of her giving birth to the Messiah was that one day she's get a sword through her very core.

It was a statement that true faith and pain often go hand in hand.

One person who I have been fascinated with a long time is a man called Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer was a German pastor during the time of Adolf Hitler and he was an exception. At the time Hitler came to power and for most of the years that the Nazis were in power, most of the pastors aligned themselves with Hitler and the Nazi party. They did so for two reasons. Hitler and the Nazis were incredibly popular and your church grew if you aligned yourself with him. The second reason, of course, was that you were subject to persecution if you did not join with the Nazis. So most pastors did.

Bonhoeffer was one of the few who didn't. He taught in an underground seminary and practiced his ministry in what most people would say was a clandestine fashion.

Bonhoeffer came to the United States a couple of times. He spent time at Union Theological

Seminary before going back to Germany. He became friend with an African American pastor from Harlem and grew to love the old spirituals sung in the Black churches. In his heart, he found much in common with the persecution of African Americans in that era of American history with the Nazi persecution of the Jews. He went back to Germany and came a second time, pretty much fleeing Germany, but ultimately after a short time, going back. He felt that by coming here he was running away from what God had called him to do.

Bonhoeffer associated with people who were opposed to Hitler and ultimately heard of several plots to assassinate Hitler. As a result, Bonhoeffer was arrested, sent to a concentration camp, and hanged in the final month of the war. Being faithful to God, for Bonhoeffer, proved to be very costly and the sword ultimately pierced through the core of his being.

Bonhoeffer eventually wrote about grace and he differentiated between costly grace and what he called cheap grace. To quote him about cheap grace he said:

Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin which frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession.

Costly grace, for him, was a sacrificial grace. It was a grace that reminded us that our salvation came not because Jesus snapped his fingers, but that it came at a dreadful price.

That is Simeon's ultimate point. The coming of the Messiah was not just about the joy of the birth of a baby in a stable----it marked the coming of the Messiah and the coming of the Messiah was a time of good news bought at a grace price. To follow Jesus isn't about walking in a path of flowers on a sunny day----it is a path of difficult discipleship.

This story is also a reminder of how God works. This story, at its core, is a story of a young, very obedient couple.

Mary has been invited to be the mother of God's Son, and she obediently says 'yes.'

Mary and Joseph are told to travel the long, arduous trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem because they have been told to because of a census. And they are obedient and make the journey.

They are told that it is Jewish tradition to bring the child to the Temple and they are obedient and do so.

And this story is about Mary and Joseph and Simeon, all people obedient unto God in all ways. Small story in an obscure corner of the world where amazing things are about to happen.

God works like this.

We often look for God to move among the strong and the powerful in the largest of cities.

God chose Abraham from the town of Ur to be the Father of his people. Ur?

At the base of Mount Sinai God appears to a shepherd, a son-in-law named Moses to go and free the people.

And God goes to Nazareth, a nowhere place in a nowhere province to visit a girl to change the world.

Great works of God rarely start in big places. Rather, they start in small places -- in some person with a big commitment. A person who has the ability and the courage to say 'yes.'

Thus it is with Simeon's startling simple song. It is a song which speaks of the Messiah----and an invitation to all to come and listen.