

Consolation and Confrontation: The Coming of the Christmas Child

Luke 2:22-35

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on December 22, 2019

Introduction

- ❖ As Christmas approaches in a few days, we want to consider a Christmas text that doesn't get much attention. I've never preached it. I don't know it's ever been preached in our church. There are probably thousands of pulpits this morning preaching Luke 2:1-21. It's the classic birth narrative. But we don't hear too many sermons on vv22-35 – on the events that took place a month after Jesus was born. I think you'll find these verses both interesting and provocative.
 - The question we're posing this morning is this: **Why did Jesus come into the world?** What did he come for? What was his purpose, his mission? Now, if you think about it, to even ask this question is amazing. It should give us pause to consider how it even makes sense to ask this question of Jesus.
 - **If I were to ask you, "Why did you come into this world?", you wouldn't have an answer.** You didn't decide to be born. You had no choice or say in the matter. It just happened to you. You came into the world without any clue as to why you're here. You've spent decades trying to figure that out. Some of you are still trying to figure out why you're here.

- ❖ But not Jesus. Jesus is different. Now he's the same as us in that he entered this world as a man. **But unlike us, he made a conscious decision to come.** Unlike us, he had a purpose for coming. He knew exactly why he came that first Christmas morning. And as a passage like ours this morning touches on that very question. Why did Jesus come into the world?
 - From our text, we could answer in four ways that fit under two broad categories: consolation and confrontation. (1) He came to console by saving all peoples. (2) He came to console by fulfilling all of the law. (3) He came to confront by creating conflict between us. (4) He came to confront by creating conflict within us.

Consolation by Saving All Peoples

- ❖ The first thing we see is that Jesus came to bring consolation by saving all peoples. This is what we learn from Simeon in our text. Simeon is introduced in v25 as a righteous and devout man who was waiting for the consolation of Israel. Now what does that mean? What was he waiting for? **He was waiting for the Messiah – the promised Consoler of Israel.**
 - Keep in mind that Israel was still under foreign occupation, which had lasted for centuries. Over five hundred years earlier, the Babylonians had conquered Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and burned down the temple of God. **And you have to understand – that for Israel – the temple was the manifestation of God's earthly presence and pleasure among his people.** But in Ezekiel 10, prior to the temple's destruction, the prophet sees the Glory of the Lord departing from the temple.
 - And ever since then – even after the return from exile and after the construction of the Second Temple – **there's no converse vision of the Glory returning.** Nowhere do you read of someone seeing the Glory of the Lord returning to Jerusalem in the same way and residing in the temple once again.

- ❖ **That's why righteous, devout Israelites like Simeon were still waiting. Waiting for the Glory to return.** Waiting for the promised Messiah. Waiting for the Anointed One who would restore Israel to her former glory – by bringing back the Glory of the Lord.
 - So up to this point in redemptive history, their hopes have been deferred. They're still waiting. Still asking, *“Is the Lord coming back? Will God still live among us? Will his Glory return and dwell with us again?”* Up to this point, the jury is still out.

- ❖ But Simeon remains hopeful because he was given a promise. Look at v26, *“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.”* Christ is not a last name but a title. It's the same as Messiah, in Greek instead of Hebrew. It's means Anointed. He won't die until he sees the Lord's Anointed with his own eyes.
 - So just picture this faithful man (It doesn't say he's old but it seems to be implied). **Picture Simeon making his daily trek to the Temple Mount.** Climbing those steps nine story high to the plateau of Mt. Zion. Walking around the outer courts. Looking intently at every passerby. Wondering, *“Is this the day? Is this the day I'll see the Lord's Christ?”*

- ❖ I wonder who he was expecting to see. As his eyes would dart around the crowd, who were his eyes drawn towards? When he saw a strapping young man with broad shoulders, a head taller than others, did Simeon stare and wonder, *“Is that him?”* When he walked by one of the revered religious teachers, with a throng of disciples behind him hanging on every word, did he wonder, *“Is that him?”* I'm not surprised if those were the kind of people he looked for in the crowd.
 - **So just imagine Simeon's surprise when he passes by this couple holding a baby boy and suddenly, by some prompting, the Holy Spirit says. “This is him.”** This is the Messiah. The Consoler of Israel. The One who brings back the Glory of the Lord.

- ❖ So we read, in v28, that Simeon scoops up the month-old child and blessed God saying, *“²⁹Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation.”* **Now notice right there that he doesn't say he saw the Lord's Christ – but that he saw the Lord's salvation.** I think that's significant. Simeon recognized that Jesus was not just a savior like any other hero in Israel's vaunted history. **Jesus was unique in that he was the very embodiment of God's salvation.**
 - Unlike in other religions, in Christianity, salvation is not centered on adopting certain principles and practices. Principles and practices are there – but not at the center. At the center of our salvation are not pillars of faith to adopt or noble truths to embrace. **At the center of Christian salvation is a person to love and trust.** Jesus is God's salvation in the flesh. His name is fitting. The name Jesus means *“The Lord saves.”*

- ❖ Now think about this. Because Christian salvation is *not* centered on a culturally-bound set of practices but rather on a person who is the Lord of all the earth – **that means, with the arrival of Christ, salvation has been universally expanded and made available to all peoples of all cultures.** That's what's meant by saving all peoples. We're not talking about a universal salvation where the Messiah saves all persons on earth without exception. But we are talking about a universal mission to save all peoples (or people groups) on earth without distinction.

- ❖ We're talking about salvation for all nations. And this is what Simeon recognizes and what he says in v31, "³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."

 - **This is the first mention in Luke's Gospel of the universal mission of God to reach all peoples on the earth with the light of Christ.** And it's definitely not the last. This theme of Jesus being a light to the Gentiles culminates in Luke's second book, the book of Acts. But even here you begin to see that universal light shining in a little baby.

- ❖ And that's what really stands out to me in this story. It's how Simeon realizes that he's staring at the Lord's salvation – looking at a little baby in his arms! **Apparently he felt no need to see Jesus grow up first and prove himself to be the real Messiah.** Simeon didn't need that kind of proof. He could see Jesus as the Messiah through the eyes of faith. He trusted in what God said. This is the Christ. He may not look like what you expected. But he's the One you've been waiting for. This is him.
 - And now having seen the Messiah through eyes of faith, Simeon is ready to die. That's what he says in v29. He's ready to "*depart in peace*". **That language is the biblical language of a watchman – who can now be dismissed from his post once the anticipated event has come.** Simeon was faithful and vigilant in his watch, and now he can rest in peace. Now he's ready to die.
- ❖ And friends, he's not alone. **Anyone who sees Jesus as the Messiah through eyes of faith is also, like Simeon, ready to die.** You too can face death knowing that you'll depart in peace. I know some of you have experienced the death of a loved one this past year. And through that, you were confronted with your own mortality. When you saw your loved one lying in that casket, you were starkly reminded that that will be you one day. Unless the Second Advent comes first, death will be the reality for us all.
 - But if you can look to Jesus – and despite your preconceived notions, despite your expectations – **if you can see him as the Messiah, as the Lord's Salvation, through eyes of faith, then you're ready to die no matter when that day is appointed.** That's the consolation we receive in the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Consolation by Fulfilling All the Law

- ❖ So the first answer to our question of why Jesus came into the world is to bring consolation by saving all peoples. Here's the second answer: Jesus came into the world to console by fulfilling all of the law. This point explains exactly how Jesus accomplishes our salvation. **He will faithfully and righteously fulfill the law of the Lord – doing for us what we could not do for ourselves in our own strength.**
- ❖ Take a look at vv22-27. **And notice this repeated emphasis on the parents of Jesus doing whatever is written in the law of the Lord.** "²²And 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") ²⁴and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of

turtledoves, or two young pigeons. . . . ²⁷And 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.”

- When you see a pattern like that in Scripture, you can be sure that it’s not a coincidence. Luke the author is trying to tell us something. He’s presenting Jesus and his parents as faithful keepers of the law of God.
- ❖ Follow the pattern with me. The Law of Moses requires Hebrew boys to be circumcised when they are eight days old (Gen 17:12; Lev 12:3). Which the parents do in v21. And the Law also says that a new mother is considered ceremonially unclean after giving birth, due to all the blood involved (Lev 12:1-5). She has to wait thirty-three days and then she can offer two sacrifices for purification – a lamb for a burnt offering and a turtledove or pigeon for a sin offering (Lev 12:6-7). But if she’s too poor to afford a lamb, she can offer two turtledoves or two pigeons to cover both sacrifices. And then she’ll be ceremonially clean. This is all found in Leviticus 12.
 - So notice how Mary and Joseph offer a pair of turtledoves or pigeons, indicating that Jesus wasn’t born into wealth. He wasn’t even born into a family that could afford a lamb. **He was born into poverty, into a family of humble, meager means.**
 - ❖ But it was a family devoted to the Law. **Every ancient Hebrew couple knew that the Law says their firstborn son belongs to the Lord.** That’s what it means in v23, “*as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.”*” So every family is to take their firstborn son and present him to the Lord, signifying their understanding that their son is a gift from God and belongs to him. But according to Numbers 18:15, you can redeem back your son with five shekels of silver. The payment is not mentioned in our text, but it’s likely implied.
 - **So the reason the family was there on the temple grounds that day was to get ceremonially clean and to present Jesus to the Lord and redeem him back** – all according to the Law of the Lord. And if you keep reading into Luke 3:21, you see Jesus submitting himself to a baptism of repentance, which he had no need for. In Matthew’s gospel, he records John the Baptist’s hesitancy to baptize Jesus, saying, “I should be baptized by you.” But Jesus’s reply is profound. He says, “*Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*” (Mt 3:14-15)
 - ❖ This emphasis on how Jesus and his parents meticulously kept the Law of God, to fulfill all righteousness, is no small detail in the Gospels. **It’s making clear that Jesus came to faithfully keep what we consistently defy – to fulfill what we continually fail.**
 - We all stand guilty before the Law. A righteous Law that we’re so prone to break. That’s what it means to be a sinner. And our guilt calls for our condemnation. For punishment that consists of eternal torment in a place of hopeless agony. **Considering the plight of man – our condition in the flesh – this means we need a Savior who does more than just rescue us from the grips of an enemy. We need a Savior who can redeem us from the guilt of sin.**

- ❖ **Imagine a savior who comes with might and power to break you free from debtor's prison** – only to discover that the one who holds a claim on your life is no mere creditor but the High King himself. That means there's nowhere you can escape to within the kingdom. There's nowhere that's beyond his reach or jurisdiction.
 - And now imagine the One who holds a claim on your life is none other than the King of kings and the Lord of lords – the King of the whole world. There is nowhere you can escape. Having someone break you free from one prison after another is no real solution. **What you need is someone who can finally pay off your debt and free you from the guilt of your sins against the laws of the King.**

- ❖ Friends, that's the kind of Savior Jesus is. That's the kind of consolation he came to bring. He came to fulfill the law of God on our behalf. To perfectly keep it. **And now by faith in him – through hiding yourself in him – God will graciously count the perfect obedience of his Son as ours.** That's what it means to be justified. To have our guilt erased. To be right in God's eyes.
 - And it's all because Jesus fulfills the law. The law demands a righteous life – he lives that life for us. The law demands death as an atonement for our sin – he dies that death for us. **The consolation that we find in the gospel is the good news that Jesus came to be a fitting substitute – to come and take our place.** That's at the heart of Christmas. Jesus became like us. He identified with our creatureliness, with our frailty.

- ❖ That's why it's significant that his parents could only afford two turtledoves. They were poor. Jesus could've been born into any other family in the line of David. But God chose a poor couple because the Messiah was going to be poor. **He had to be poor to identify with the poor – the materially poor and the spiritually poor.** And then he could live the life we should've lived and eventually die the death we deserve to die.

Confrontation by Creating Conflict Between Us

- ❖ So we've seen two ways in which Jesus came to bring consolation. Now let's see two ways in which he led to confrontation. Here's our third point: Jesus came to confront by creating conflict between us. This might surprise you. We're so used to hearing, during the Christmas season, that Jesus brought peace on earth and goodwill to men. **So it sounds jarring to speak of Christmas having anything to do with confronting people and dividing them.**

- ❖ It's like when I listen to Handel's Messiah. It's always around this time of year that I'm playing Messiah in the background while I'm studying or writing sermons. It's so much a part of the background that I no longer pay attention to the words. But take the Hallelujah Chorus, for example. We're so accustomed to hearing it that we don't realize what it says.
 - The words are from Revelation 19. It's where John hears the heavens roar with hallelujah, and he sees Jesus coming down, riding a white horse, brandishing a sword, with a name on his robe and on his thigh that says, "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16). **The Hallelujah Chorus is about Jesus coming down to pick a fight.** He's bringing some confrontation. Does that even compute for you? Does that fit your picture of Jesus?

- ❖ But that's the picture that Simeon tries to paint for Mary in v34. Look there with me, "*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"*." He's saying this cute little one-month old baby is appointed to create a divide between people. Some are going to be lifted up. Others will be cast down.
 - **Now that shouldn't have surprised Mary considering how the prophets spoke of God's Messiah being a precious cornerstone for some but a stone of stumbling for others.** So we read in **Isaiah 28:16** of God saying he'll lay down a stone in Zion – a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation – and whoever trusts in it will be secure.
 - But then we read in **Isaiah 8:14-15**, "¹⁴*And he will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling to both houses of Israel, a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.* ¹⁵*And many shall stumble on it. They shall fall and be broken; they shall be snared and taken.*" That doesn't sound like your typical Advent reading. No one reads Isaiah 8 around the Christmas tree. And yet it's all about Christmas – about why Jesus came.

- ❖ Jesus came to confront. To create conflict between us. To divide us into two camps. **All of humanity falls into one of two categories depending on how we respond to Jesus.** We're either sheep or goats. We're either wheat or chaff. He's either going to lift you up or trip you up. Jesus will be that precious cornerstone for you, or he'll be a stone of offense. **Jesus has that kind of polarizing effect on people. As the Puritans used to say, the same sun melts the wax but hardens the clay.** And, of course, the question we're left with is: *Which am I?* Am I wax that humbly melts before the Christ? Or am I clay who gets hardened by the Christ?

- ❖ If you've never read John Stott's *Basic Christianity*, I highly recommend it. In it, he demonstrates from the Gospel accounts how no one came away from an encounter with Jesus with a ho-hum, no-opinion, neutral stance. **No, people either walked away from Jesus angry or they tried to follow him.** No one who encountered the real Jesus could remain neutral, without an opinion.
 - Imagine someone coming up to you and saying "I own you. You belong to me." There's no way you can be neutral to that. **You could either dismiss the guy as a lunatic or you could follow him.** So if you still consider yourself neutral towards Jesus – or if your friend insists that he or she has no opinion about Jesus – then it probably means you or your friend has yet to encounter the real Jesus. **The real Jesus is that polarizing.**

- ❖ If Jesus simply came as a Savior who's going to rescue you from an eternal hell. And all you need to do is to repeat these words after me or pray this prayer. Well, no one's going to be offended by that. **No one's going to reject Jesus if he's just presented as a free ticket to heaven or as free insurance from the fires of hell.** Who turns away free fire insurance?
 - But if Jesus came to be our Savior *and* Lord, who not just makes a way to heaven but makes a demand that we take up our cross and follow him – **if he claims to own you, if he says you belong to him – then you can see why people will stumble over that.**

- ❖ **Friends, if the Jesus that you've heard about is not a Jesus anyone would stumble over – not a polarizing Jesus that confronts people – then you probably haven't met the real Jesus.** If right now you're thinking, "I don't know if I agree with you. I think I'm one of those people in the middle. I'm neutral towards Jesus. I don't have a strong opinion."
 - I hear what you're saying. But what I'm saying is that if you don't have a strong opinion towards Jesus – one way or the other – then it leads me to conclude that you haven't read or heard what Jesus actually claims about himself and what he demands from you.
 - **He claims to be the King of kings and Lord of lords.** He claims authority over you. He claims to own you. So he demands your allegiance, your trust, your obedience, your utter devotion to him. **You can't just ignore someone making such demands over your life. You've got to either dismiss him as a lunatic or begin to follow him.** It's your choice. But you've got to make one.

Confrontation by Creating Conflict Within Us

- ❖ That leads to the fourth answer to our question. Why did Jesus come into the world? He came to confront by creating conflict – not just between us – but within us. **Each of us has to answer for ourselves: *How will I respond to Jesus?***
 - Jesus forces all of us to examine our own hearts. Which can be an unpleasant experience. It can cut deep and hurt. Listen to what Simeon said to Mary in v35, "*and a sword will pierce through your own soul also*), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."
- ❖ **Simeon is telling Mary that this baby of yours will bring you pain.** He's going to create conflict in you because he's going to create conflict and division between people in your hometown of Nazareth. That's what happens in Luke 4. And closer to home, the Gospel accounts tell us that Jesus's own brothers refused to believe he was the Christ at first (Jn 7:5). And then Mary would hear Jesus tell others that his mother and brothers were his disciples (Mk 3:31-35). And to be his disciple you have to "hate" your father and mother and follow him (Lk 14:26). I'm sure hearing that hurt. So in addition to being there, in the end, to see her son die, I think this is what Simeon was referring to. **To the pain Mary will feel as her son begins to form his own family of disciples and draws distinctions from his family of origin.**
- ❖ But that's what Mary – and the rest of us – have to come to grips with. **Jesus came to bring a sword.** Listen to what he says in **Matthew 10:34-36**, "³⁴*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.*"
 - I know this is hard to hear. But that's the conflict Jesus raises within each of us. Now don't read this out of context and misinterpret Jesus. **He's not actually encouraging hatred and hostility towards family members. But he is clarifying his lordship.** He's clarifying the kind of allegiance he expects from his followers. For Jesus to be your Lord means that all other allegiances, including family allegiances, have to take a backseat. Jesus came as King of kings and Lord of lords.

- ❖ Anyone who has taken Jesus at his word – and taken serious his claim over our lives – will tell you that it really does reveal what’s in your heart. **When you take the Bible seriously, God uses it like a sword to cut deep and expose the idols of your heart.** You’ll find out what you’re really trusting in – what really has your allegiance.
 - It’s definitely going to hurt. Having a sword pierce your soul always will. But just know that God only does it to save you. **He wields the sword – not like an executioner – but like a surgeon.** What he’s going to do in your heart is going to hurt. He’s going to cut out and expose some cherished idols. **But like any good surgeon, he does all that cutting for your good. He does it to bring healing.**
 - If you say “I don't want a sword in my soul”, then just imagine if Jesus said the same. What if he said, “I don't want a sword in my soul. I don't want to suffer for these people.”? Where would that leave us?

- ❖ Thank God we have a loving Savior, a merciful Messiah. Who suffered in our place. Who bore the cross. Who took the executioner’s sword – so that we wouldn’t have to. So that the sword that goes into our hearts could be more like a surgeon’s scalpel. **This Christmas I pray that all of us will come face to face with the real Jesus and experience both the confrontation and consolation of his gospel.**