

## The Sign of Peace

Luke 2:25 -39

Dixie W. Brachlow

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Fairfield Presbyterian Church

It is the final Sunday of 2009! Imagine that! We will soon be in 2010, double digits already – the tens and then the teens, and on and on through the century. We imagine that old image of grandfather time giving way to the New Year baby. Letting go of the old, making room for the new. So today we focus on the story of a new baby in an old man’s arms.

Luke 2: 25-38 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup>It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. <sup>27</sup>Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, <sup>28</sup>Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, <sup>29</sup>‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; <sup>30</sup>for my eyes have seen your salvation, <sup>31</sup>which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, <sup>32</sup>a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’

<sup>33</sup> And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup>Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup>then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup>At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

In December of 1997, I made a pastoral visit to a dear older man from my church who was in the veteran's hospital receiving chemo treatments for a cancer that had returned. Art was a humble man, and was ever helping others. That summer he and his wife had made over 100 hand-lettered scrolls for children in the vacation bible school at our church. For over a decade, he had tenderly cared for his frail, blind wife. When Art said he'd do something, he meant it. In his hospital room he spoke freely of his past experiences, telling me of life as a young soldier in WWII, "wet behind the ears," he said of himself. He talked about disappointments and frustrations with healthcare and his own ailing body, and of his love for his wife. Surprising even myself, I did something I think the Spirit prompted me to do: I asked him to pray.

Art's prayer moved me deeply. "It's this old man again, Lord. It's been a tough year. You know there were times in my life when I even doubted your existence. Then, I thought in '90 that my time was up, but here you've given me seven extra years to care for my wife..." And he went on, thanking God for life and then praying for me. What astonished me was his straight talk, his honesty. He did not cover up his doubts about God, nor did he use nice words and lofty ideals to impress me. He was speaking truthfully. I sensed a deep peace about him. I longed to stay with Art, to just listen to him tell me stories about his full life with its joys and its pains.

There is grace and light as I recall this man. I imagine Simeon was somewhat like him. This elderly man in the temple who held baby Jesus in his arms had known that his time to die was coming. Both my friend and this very prophetic Simeon seemed to be at peace with God. And when Simeon took the child in his arms, he praised God for keeping the promise to

him that he would not die before seeing the Messiah. The infant Jesus was, he announced, “the consolation of Israel,” “the comfort of God’s people” for which the Jewish people had waited. Simeon’s life, it seems, was fulfilled in a profoundly joyous way and he could “depart in peace.”



Anna too, praised God for the infant, speaking about the hope and promise of the child. The Holy Spirit had led both Anna and Simeon to prophecy about the infant, telling of the greatness and blessedness of the child Simeon held. As he addressed Mary, Simeon wove a dark thread through his bright tapestry of hopes and inspired songs and prophecies. What was a bright hope for Israel was also a

threat to its own unity. *“Behold, this child is destined to cause the fall and the rise of many within Israel, and to be a sign that is disputed. Indeed, a sword will cut through your very life---hearts will be revealed.”*

*“A sign that is disputed.”* This shadow side of suffering to Jesus and his family would extract a price of great pain for them all. The infant Mary and Joseph carried into the temple would grow up to challenge the religious leaders’ set ways. Any decision to follow Jesus would cause deep divisions within families, and his followers would sometimes lose their lives for believing.

Once, when I’d preached about the peace that Christ brings us, I was challenged by a member at the church door, “What about Matthew 10:34? *“I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man*

*against his father, and a daughter against her mother...*” The question was appropriate. Our faith is not complete without understanding the paradox that Christ, who is the Prince of Peace, upsets another kind of peace. He upsets what might be called the “status quo.” Jesus challenges our assumptions of who the real winners are, of where our emphasis should be placed. He defies wealth and position as the measure of success, replacing them with love and justice and integrity. Yet we don’t quite trust God’s love as the way, just yet.

One day when I was in the tenth grade in my high school back in Minnesota, as everyone was passing through the halls, I was talking with a friend right beside a small red box with a little bar ready for pulling, a fire alarm. With my fingers, I toyed with it and –wonder of wonders—suddenly the bar flipped down (way too easily, I thought!) and bells began ringing loudly—jarring everyone—especially me! Suddenly students and teachers were pouring out of classrooms into the hall and flowing out the doors. I fought my way against the rush, down two very long hallways to tell the office that it was a mistake! By the time I got there, fire trucks with sirens blaring were already closing in. I knew I was in trouble. It was an offense to pull a fire alarm with no fire! When the principal asked me why I had turned on the fire alarm, I told him, “I hadn’t thought that little bar would pull away so easily. I didn’t think it would work!”

Isn’t that what we say to God? We don’t think it will work when throughout the Scriptures, God urges us to put love first, to have goodwill toward all people, to pray for others, to help others, care for and serve them. In Jesus, God shows us that love is the way. But we don’t think it will work. Instead, we uphold the status quo, relying on power plays and hostile threats and political strategies and bureaucratic systems. We plot against one

another. We flog one another with cruel words and deadly gossip. We crucify one another trying to get our way. The way of peace upsets the way “things work,” or rather, the ways our systems (unjust as some may be) work. Where do we find courage to face the injustices and the darkness in the world?

At times, we turn away from the hope of peace--both in the world and within ourselves. Death of a loved one comes, loss of a job, a dream is crushed, and we despair. We nearly stop believing. It would be easier to become cynical, to give up the wonder of God in the cradle and the cross, to join the throngs who just stumble their way through a cruel and disbelieving world.

However, if for one day we will try following Christ completely, living in the Spirit of love, it could change our lives forever. Christians are forever trying to lift others, holding certainties that others delight in tearing down for their sheer ludicrousness in face of the facts. The fact is, the culture around us doesn't know what to do with the kind of power that gives itself away. They can't understand the healing that comes through suffering, rather than its avoidance. They don't know what to make of love that accepts us as we are, rather than coercing us to become someone else, a love that meets us in our place of greatest vulnerability and loves us through it, rather than avoiding and denying weakness.

But that's how it is with God. If you want to find God in your life, peace with God, you need look no further than the Child lifted up reverently in the temple that day. Christmas candles and even lights on our Christmas trees, can help us focus and pay attention to the light of God with us. We can decide now, even before the New Year begins, to practice noticing the

light of God in our lives, watching for signs of peace that do make their way into the world.

There is an easy practice to which mystics and monks attest. It is simply breathing: inhaling and exhaling in a more conscious and intentionally prayerful way. I am going to ask you to do something different this morning, the last Sunday of the year, to participate in this exercise, if you will. Are you ready Breathe in and out a few times, paying attention to the way it feels. I invite you to relax your shoulders and close your eyes because this is a prayer. Now imagine that you are Simeon or Anna, and you see the baby Jesus being brought in to the Temple. Breathe slowly and easily, taking in the scene. <pause> See this infant wrapped in bands of cloth; breathe in the miracles that he will perform. <> Breathe in the love of God for the poor and the homeless. <> Breathe in God's love for you. <> Let go of everything else. <> Entrust your life to this child, who is God with us, the Prince of Peace. <> Amen.

We are not all wise elders or prophets, but we all can breathe. When we get into the habit of breathing in the loving power of God with us, time seems to slow down a little, and the glory of God is revealed, made known, even to us. We may catch a glimpse of the wideness of God's mercy, the horizon of the Holy in our midst. Perhaps, like Simeon, we will see a flash of light illuminating God's salvation, the Prince of Peace living among us, and--like Anna, and like my friend Art--we will give thanks.

*Let us pray: In you, O God, we have our life and our breath. You have loved us by sending a Savior, teaching us the ways of peace. Thank you. Amen.*

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