

January 2, 2005



A Child That Changed The World

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Luke 2:21-35

And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

And 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 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons." Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the Spirit he came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

"Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel."

And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him; and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,

"Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed."

Every parent wants to hear good things about his or her child. Every parent wants to hear that his child is special, that her child is most marvelous. Those words are cherished and remembered.

I remember the day when our daughter's kindergarten teacher called Janet and me into her classroom. She told us our daughter was special. She said Jennifer was an outstanding child. She wanted to send Jennifer over to Blacksburg, to Virginia Tech, for intelligence testing.

I remember the first conference we had with our son's second grade teacher. She whispered to us so nobody else could hear, "Ian is going to do great things." She got more excited as she said, "I don't know what he'll do in life, but I know he's destined to be special."

Those kind of words spoken about a child are cherished in a parent's heart. Those spoken words are remembered.

Those are the kind of words Mary and Joseph kept hearing about their child. They heard them even before he was born.

Gabriel came to Mary and told her that her son would be "Great, and... called the Son of the Most High..." [Luke 1:32].

An angel told Joseph that the child would "Save his people from their sins" [Matthew 1:21].

And the good words kept on coming. When Jesus was born, wise men came and worshipped him [Matthew 2:11]. Shepherds came and adored him [see Luke 2:16-17]. King Herod searched the land, hoping to kill him [Matthew 2:16]!

Right off, Mary and Joseph knew their boy was somebody special. And the good words kept on coming.

Eight days after his birth, Jesus was circumcised according to Jewish law and custom. On the eighth day after his birth, he was officially given the name "Jesus,"

- the name the angels told Mary and Joseph to give him,
- the name which means "God shall save;"
- it was a special name for a special child.

Forty days after his birth, according to Jewish law and custom, Mary and Joseph took the baby Jesus up to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a religious necessity. They had to do it.

Mary had to be purified after giving birth to a child. According to their law, a woman was called ritually “impure” for forty days after giving birth to a male child. Had the child been a female, the mother would have been “impure” for eighty days. Joseph had to take Mary up to the Temple for the act of purification. It required an animal sacrifice. They offered two pigeons as a sacrifice. That was the offering the poor people made. Had they been rich, they would have brought a lamb for slaughter.

At the same time, they present the baby Jesus at the Temple. It was a religious necessity, too. They had to dedicate their firstborn son to God. It was at that time, forty days after his birth, that they heard more good words spoken about their boy.

The man who spoke those good words was Simeon. The scripture says he was an old man, righteous and devout. The scripture says the Holy Spirit was upon him. It was the Holy Spirit that moved Simeon to go to the temple that day.

The scripture says as soon as Simeon saw the baby Jesus, Simeon hurried over, picked up that boy, and said,

“Now, I can finally die in peace, because I have finally seen God’s salvation” [Luke 2:29-30].

Simeon said, “This child will be a light” to the nations, and “glory to... Israel” [Luke 2:32].

The scripture says that Joseph and Mary “marveled at what was said about” their boy. I imagine their hearts swelled with pride. I imagine they liked hearing those good words about their baby.

Simeon blessed them all, and he said to Mary,

“This child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel...”

[Luke 2:34].

Simeon said,

this child will reveal the secret “thoughts of many hearts...”

[Luke 2:35].

Can you imagine the excitement and wonder of Mary and Joseph?

Today, every mother hopes her little boy will grow up to be a doctor, a lawyer, or even president. Back then, every Jewish mother hoped her newborn son might become the Messiah, God’s anointed King. And on that day, forty days after his birth, Mary was told her son was the One.

There is evidence to suggest that Mary and Joseph came to disbelieve those prophecies as the years passed. Those marvelous words spoken at his birth were tempered by the intervening years, by the years of normalcy, by the years when nothing special happened. When Jesus grew to be a man, he seemed ordinary. He learned carpentry. There is no reliable evidence to suggest that Jesus behaved in any way differently from all the other young men of his era and his town.

But then, thirty years after his birth, things changed. That long hidden flame within the mind and heart of Jesus burst forth. A stirring began within Jesus that changed the world.

Joseph was probably dead by then; but I wonder, did Mary remember all those good words which were spoken thirty years before? Did Mary remember Simeon's words in the Temple that day, when Simeon held the infant Jesus in his arms and said, "[this child shall be] a light to the [nations]"?

Did Mary remember those good words? Whether she did or not, this we know: Simeon was right. That child he held in his arms changed the world.

And Jesus changed the world in the ways Simeon predicted he would.

Simeon said Jesus would *lay bare the secret thoughts of many*. Oh, he did --- and he still does!

In his own time, Jesus laid bare the deceit and hypocrisy so prevalent. Corrupt hearts and vicious motives were brought out of their festering, putrid dungeons to be observed in the high-noon of sun of righteousness. The ultimate deceit of doing good things for the wrong reasons was laid bare by this man of fiery integrity. This child grew up to change the world by insisting on truthfulness, openness, integrity, and purity of heart.

It's still true today, when Jesus comes into your heart, he lays bare all your secret thoughts, all your secret desires, all your hidden secrets. You can't hide from him. He knows your motives and your intentions. He sees behind your actions, behind your words, behind your public performances.

That same Jesus calls you to acknowledge those hidden motives, to hear your own words, to look behind your public behavior. And, he calls upon you to change them first.

He changes the world by changing each man and each woman, one at a time. His message changes you for the better. His forgiveness allows you to change your ways. His love invites you to be a loving person.

So, begin this new year by allowing Jesus to change your heart.

Simeon said that the child he held in his arms would *cause the fall of many*.

Back then, King Herod was no fool. Politically shrewd as he was, he could sense political danger miles and years away. No wonder he wanted those Wise Men from the East to tell him where the newborn child lay. When they double-crossed him, Herod killed all the boy babies of Bethlehem. He missed Jesus, of course, and Herod today is remembered only as a backdrop to the story of Jesus. Back then, Herod and Augustus Caesar held all the power; but they fell, and Jesus, in all his weakness, was exalted.

Jesus caused the fall of many because he spoke the truth. Not everyone who heard his words liked what he had to say, because the words of Jesus judged them, criticized them, and revealed their sins.

Simeon was right. Many fell away because of Jesus. They could not bear to hear his words of truth. The change he required was too painful. They had wanted him to bless their way of life, but he wanted to change it. So, they fell away.

And it's still true today.

How tempting it is to tell people what they want to hear. How alluring it is to take the spirit of the times, bring it into the church, sing and pray around it, and baptize it as God's Spirit. The latest intellectual fashion or psychological fad can sound so right and authoritative. Yet, very often the truth of God stands in contradiction of what for the moment seems to be

so right,

so in,

so sophisticated.

Many people come running to the church because they had a personal need, but then turn around and walk out of church because the

word spoken did not confirm their prejudice, or uphold their interpretation of life.

They came to church, but they weren't seeking the truth. They were looking for someone to bless the way they were already living.

Jesus will not bless the way you're living. He always calls you to live better, to love better, to act better. And many fall away because of it.

Simeon said that little baby of Mary's was going to change the world because *he would cause the rise of many*.

Simeon, old and devout, holding the baby Jesus in his arms in the Jerusalem Temple long ago, was no fool. He knew the harsh realities of life. Simeon was not waiting around only to indulge in nostalgia or wishful thinking. Wise and perceptive man that he was, he was waiting for the redemption of Israel. He longed for the liberation of Israel; and when he held the baby Jesus in his arms, he knew that Jesus was that liberator.

Now that he had seen the liberation of Israel, he said, he had seen the fulfillment of his hopes, he could die in peace, knowing his life had not been lived in vain.

Simeon raises an important question for you: what are you looking for in life? What is number one in your dreams? What do you lie in bed at night longing for? What is going to satisfy your deepest desires? What will it take to grant you fulfillment?

Some might answer that they wish they had a husband or a wife who really loved them. Others might long for financial success, or fame, or a chance to change history. Some hope only for a good job, or a new car, or a large inheritance, or an extraordinary vacation.

What do you want most for your children? Good education? Financial success? Good job? Happy marriage? Healthy grandchildren?

Well, yes, I suppose that's what every parent wants for his children.

But how many of you long for your children and grandchildren to love God and Jesus Christ with all their hearts, and all their minds, and all their souls? How many of you have put the work of God's Kingdom uppermost in your minds?

That baby Jesus grew up to be the man who changed the world, and he changed the world by causing many to rise up. Who's going to rise up? Who's going to be exalted?

Jesus said his Kingdom belongs to the meek, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the comforters, the seekers after righteousness, the sufferers.

Jesus said his Kingdom belongs to those who humble themselves, who take the less conspicuous seats at the banquet, who come to serve rather than to be served, who have hearts and minds seeking after truth and integrity, justice, and love.

These are the ones, Jesus said, who will be raised up and exalted.

Has he described you? Do you fit the bill? Are you going to rise up?

Make this new year the year you begin your rise. Year after year, century after century, Jesus' Kingdom marches on. In language after language people sing his praises. In structures which range from mud huts to simple, wooden-frame buildings to ornate cathedrals, millions upon millions bend their knees in worship and adoration to this Child who became a King.

His Kingdom marches on, transcending every national boundary, every barrier of time, every atheistic citadel, every intellectual denial - marching on and on -

- into every expectant, receptive heart.

Make this year

- the year your heart expects Jesus to enter in,

- the year you receive his great good news of forgiveness and love,

- the year he changes your life.

Let Us Pray:

Eternal God, who existed before all time, who is present in time, and will continue to exist when time has ceased to be - You have ordained the universe to exist in time. You have set the sun and moon in their places to make day and night and to measure seasons and festival days. Even in Your eternal timelessness, You have given us the rhythm of time to measure our days upon earth. We praise and adore You.

We confess, O God, our frustration with time - with its swift passage and the ways we have squandered its precious gift. In this holiday season, when many of us remember and mourn our loved ones - with us a few

moments in time, then taken from us before their time - when we remember them, we confess our propensity to take time for granted and our tendency not to be thankful for each moment we are given.

Some of us are frivolous with time;

- some of us have too much time on our hands,

- others of us only mark time

- or kill time

- or passively await our time.

Forgive any misuse of time, O God, and teach us to number our days and to get a heart of wisdom.

O God, who wishes to make all our time full of meaning, come anew to each of us in this new year.

Open our minds in reverence and awe to the presence of the Christ.

Open our hearts to our family and to our beloved Jesus.

Let grudges of times past be cast aside so that this new year may only bring greater opportunities for love.

Infuse our weary and burdened spirits with a new gift of Your divine energy so that we might, with new zest, work for peace on earth, good will toward men.

We thank you, O God, for all gifts of time, especially for Jesus Christ in whom time was begun, redeemed, and fulfilled. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.