

## A sign that is opposed

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. [Amen].

Our text for today is the Gospel according to Luke in the second chapter:

*“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”<sup>1</sup>*

These words of Simeon seem to lack the joy and cheerfulness we’ve probably grown accustomed to over these last few weeks in the church year. On Christmas Eve, we heard the angelic announcement to the shepherds of peace on earth and goodwill to men. In addition to adding the Gloria back into the liturgy, this Christmastide we’ve also found ourselves singing such hymns as “Let Our Gladness Have No End” and “Joy to the World.” Along with Joseph and Mary, we’ve marveled at the birth of Christ and all the glad tidings of peace which accompanied it.

But now, nine days after Christmas, it’s safe to say that the glad tidings of the holiday season are slowly wearing off. Like I’m sure it was for the shepherds who returned to their fields, the time after Christmas always brings with it a sense of melancholy. Students are returning to school and the day to day grind of the work week is back in full swing. The lull of Christmas is coming to a close and whatever challenges of this life we’ve successfully ignored for a short stint now confront us once again.

So, as the reality of life on this side of glory sets back in, our response to Simeon’s words today shows us how well we’ve actually understood the message of Christmas. What I mean, is that Simeon’s words capture the fullness of that message in a way that many are tempted to ignore. Simeon looks past the joy of the new parents and past the cute infant Christ in his own arms and reminds us that Christmas is not sheer poetry. The birth of Christ certainly means peace on earth and goodwill to men, but this peace doesn’t come without conflict and it doesn’t come without a price. In fact, the great paradox of Christmas is that peace comes through its opposite, namely the conflict experienced by One Man as He bears the weight of this world’s sin on His own shoulders.

Simeon prophesied in the temple that,

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:34-35.

*“The Christ child was appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed.”<sup>2</sup>*

In the Scriptures, a sign often means something that contains and conveys what God is doing and giving – and at the same time these signs usually hide under what appears to be their opposite.<sup>3</sup> Meaning, a greater reality is contained in something that seems anything but great. Like God gave the sign of swaddling clothes and a manger to announce the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds, God uses signs to make us adopt the posture of faith and become passive recipients of His promises. Through signs, we are left with nothing but trust in Him.

For that reason, as Simeon prophesied, Christ was never a popular Messiah. As a sign opposed, Christ revealed the sinful hearts of men and so He was scorned, despised, and rejected. For our peace, Isaiah says that Christ was a man without peace. He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, as one from whom men hid their faces He was despised and esteemed not. This was true from His first sermon in Nazareth when He was met with the jeer, *“Is not this Joseph’s son?”*<sup>4</sup> to His last sermon from the cross when He was scoffed at with the heckle, *“He saved others; let Him save Himself.”*<sup>5</sup>

Jesus was and is a sign opposed by many because His life and teachings do not conform to the world’s expectations of who God should be. Churches are busting at the seams on Christmas Eve because nobody has a problem hearing about a cute baby being born in a stable on a cold winter night, and nobody has a problem with the tranquility of a silent night when all is calm and all is bright. But to put it plainly, Simeon’s words confront us with the reality that it’s not enough to receive Jesus as the Babe in Bethlehem, we must also receive Him as the crucified One. He is more than just a Child born of Mary – as the Prophetess Anna says, He is the redemption of Jerusalem – meaning, our sin-Bearer. So then, the calm of Christmas night should never be detached from the violence of Good Friday when the earth shook, rocks were split, and darkness covered the earth at midday.

Ultimately, Christ’s death on the cross causes the hearts of many to be revealed. How people respond to His death reveals what they think of themselves and more importantly what they think of God. And sadly, often responses show that many do not believe in Him. Those who

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:34.

<sup>3</sup> N. Nagel, “First Sunday After Christmas,” in the *Selected Sermons of Norman Nagel* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Luke 4:22.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 27:42.

don't believe are the ones who don't care enough to make the Words of Jesus the primary focus of their existence. Sure, they might come to church on special occasions like Christmas, but they refuse to accept the truth that Christ calls His people to observe all things He has commanded. With itching ears, they follow after the whims of their own hearts and conjure up some Christ who embraces all forms of love, tolerance, equality, and freedom of choice. They refuse to accept that faith in the crucified Jesus is the only way to heaven and instead they teach faith plus works or even that all religions lead to the same place. They do have faith in a Christ, just not the Christ of the Scriptures.

So, even though Emmanuel was meant to be God with them for salvation, their rejection means Emmanuel for Judgment. Jesus says that on the Last Day many will cry, "Lord, Lord," and He will respond, "I never knew you."<sup>6</sup> Just as hell was not prepared for mankind, but for the devil and his demons, so the unbelievers fall is not God's aim. The angels weren't lying when they said, "peace on earth and goodwill to men." But through unbelief and rejection, through their insistence on their own way, Jesus will become a stumbling block that leads many to their damnation. As Christ Himself says later in the Gospels,

*The stone that the builders rejected, has become the cornerstone. Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him.*<sup>7</sup>

For those who persist in sin and unrepentance, as Simeon prophesied, this Child will be for their fall. Hearts will be revealed and Christ will be for a sign opposed to the deterrent and loss of faith.

Yet, since the sign that Simeon spoke of was that of Christ's death on the cross – this means that this child is appointed not just for the fall of many, but for the rising of many too. However, just as God gave the sign of peace through what appeared to be its opposite, namely through Christ's humiliation and suffering, your peace from sin, death, and hell can only be received in that same lowly way. Your salvation is not a matter of you first putting yourself in the position to be saved. Nor is it accomplished when you insist on your own way of doing things or on your own way of thinking about God. Life is not gained through your living, but through your dying. And righteousness is not gained through your working, but through your believing.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:22.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 20:17-18.

It's true that many may reject Christ and die eternally. For truly, as Jesus says how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of heaven.<sup>8</sup> But, by God's grace, many, like yourselves will be crushed by His Law and the sword of His Word will pierce your soul. The mirror of His Law will blind you to all other hope except Christ Himself. And forsaking your own righteousness, you will cling to His.

By God's grace, through Baptism, you have already been joined to the death of Jesus. And there in that death God has drowned your sins and the Old Adam too. Dead to sin, now you live to God. And by daily contrition and repentance, God will continue to put to death all sin in you that the New Man might continually arise to live before Him in righteousness and purity forever.

So, the sign of the cross which once meant death, now marks you as one redeemed for life eternal. The cross of Jesus is a sign for both your fall and your rising. For your dying to yourself and your living to Him. The cornerstone that the builders rejected has crushed you, but now He serves as your firm foundation.

Today then, by the comfort of God's Holy Word, let the sinful thoughts of your heart give way to pure thoughts of Christ. In Christian freedom, feel free to join your mind with your hands by making the sign of the cross when you wake up in the morning and when you go to bed at night. Make that sign whenever Satan tempts you and whenever God works through His Means of Grace to bring you forgiveness. The sign of the cross is not magic, and your salvation is not dependent upon whether or not you make it, but as a sign it contains and conveys what God is doing and giving... Because the cross of Jesus is your fall and your rise – your redemption and your peace. Amen.

**And the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. [Amen]**

Midweek of First Sunday After Christmas

Luke 2:33-40; 2 Samuel 7:1-16; Galatians 4:1-7

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 19:16 ff