

*Wait of Expectation*  
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Text: Luke 2:22-35

If it is true that necessity is the mother of invention, then change is the offspring of courage and desperation.

This morning, either out of courage, or desperation, I want to change things up a little and do this sermon a little differently than others.

Usually, I try to write sermons that are simple, clear, focused, engaging, catchy, and well-written. Coming out of a not particularly well-rested or productive week in my life, this sermon will likely be none of those things. But hopefully it will teach you a few things.

And, with the Holy Spirit's movement among us, we might just hear God's Word and be moved from where we are, into where we are going as the people of God.

Before proceeding, I want to share two quotes in yesterday's news that caught my attention. The first is from Israel's Defense Minister, Barak Ehud, who sought to defend Israel's massive and deadly response in Gaza against the repeated mortar attacks launched by Hamas. With a nod to the book of Ecclesiastes, Ehud said, "There is a time for calm and a time for fighting, and this is the time for fighting."

Quote number two comes from Columbus, Ohio, whose mayor, Michael Coleman, expressed the dire straits of cities and states (rhyme not intended) in light of our nation's worsening economic crisis. Speaking of his city's need for an infusion of federal cash, Coleman said that a rescue package was "*essential* to the *salvation* of America."

We will return to these quotes later. For now, let's get into our text.

For that, you will need your Bibles. I've noticed that many of the Bibles in these pews have that "new-book" smell and feel, as though they've never been opened. Their sheen and shine is a bit of an affront to our theological heritage...

Other traditions in the Christian faith do a fantastic job of offering visual evidence in their sanctuaries to the wonder and beauty of God. Through gilded statues, colorful stained glass, and gold-trimmed icons, one can truly encounter God's holiness.

In the Reformed Tradition in which Westminster and other Presbyterian churches reside, our sanctuaries are intentionally simple. Our tradition has been suspicious, generally, of that which would distract our eyes and attention from the sovereign God, uniquely and authoritatively witnessed to in the pages of Scripture.

For us, the Bibles in your pews are *our* stained glass windows, *our* icons, our statues, our witness to God's power and love. It behooves us to open them from time to time, lest we miss their holiness and complex beauty.

In this sermon, we're going to open up those blue books. We're going to encounter a text that moves us, perhaps reluctantly, away from the manger scene at Christmas into an exhilarating, but worrisome glimpse of who Jesus is, what he will become, and what his life and ministry will mean not only for Israel, but all nations. And, if the Holy Spirit helps us, we'll glimpse who and what he can be and mean for us.

So, turn to page 59 (NT).

Aided by Raymond Brown, professor at Union Theological Seminary, I want to walk us through a few ways in which this text is connected to others, both those that precede and follow it, and talk about why that connection is so important.

The first connection occurs between the presentation of Jesus and the Jewish law established in the time of Moses.

Beginning at verse 2:22, we see that when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, Joseph and Mary “brought (Jesus) to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’) and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

Now, mark this place with your bulletin, and turn with me to Exodus 13:1 (page 59...note it’s the same page as the Luke text)

**Exodus 13:1** The LORD said to Moses: <sup>2</sup> consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.

This requirement recalls the act of Passover, where the firstborn children Egypt were killed, but the firstborn of Israel were spared.

The law initially required that the firstborn be given away to God’s service, but the requirement was changed such that families were able to redeem, or “buy back,” their firstborn for a price. It is this tradition, in part, that has Mary and Joseph journeying to Jerusalem.

They’re also headed to the temple to satisfy laws regarding the purification of women after childbirth. Turn now to Leviticus 12 (page 98). Verse 12:2 states, “If a woman conceives and bears a male child, she shall be ceremonially unclean seven days.” Once her time of uncleanness passes, verse 6 commands that “She shall bring to the priest...a lamb for a burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering.” “If she cannot afford a sheep,” it says in verse 8, “she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons.”

In Luke, Mary and Joseph are adhering to the laws of their ancestors. Luke emphasizes that the presentation of Jesus occurs in the context of obedience to God’s law given to Israel in the time of Moses. Jesus’ story and Israel’s history are linked.

This is the first connection I want to make between our text from Luke and its past.

A second connection comes in the song of Simeon.

Touched deeply by the Spirit, Simeon meets the child Jesus, takes him in his arms, and praises God with a song that is known as the Nunc Dimittis. (Latin, literally meaning, “now you send forth”). The words of this song you have already read aloud in the reading of Scripture.

His song has key motifs: seeing salvation, the sight of all the peoples, a light to the Gentiles, and glory for Israel.

As is no surprise, these motifs have their home in the hopes of a broken and battered Israel, articulated centuries before in the words of the prophet Isaiah during the time of exile. Let’s check a few out:

- **Isaiah 42:6 (670)** I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, **a light to the nations,**
- **Isaiah 46:13 (676)** <sup>13</sup>I bring near my deliverance, it is not far off, and my salvation will not tarry; I will put **salvation in Zion,** for **Israel my glory.**
- **Isaiah 52:9-10 (683)** Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the **LORD has comforted his people,** he has redeemed Jerusalem. <sup>10</sup> The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and **all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.**

Note that the praise on Simeon's lips echoes poetic longings of his ancestors. It also speaks of the future salvation assured to, and realized by, those outside Israel's fold.

Lastly, we will turn to Simeon's blessing to Mary, found in Luke 2: 34-35. The blessing also carries with it a prediction.

- **Luke 2:34-35** <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."
  - **Turn to Psalm 118:22 (565):** the stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.
- See how this predicts the way Jesus' own people would respond to his teaching.
  - **Luke 4:29 (61-62):** <sup>29</sup> They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

One could point to many more connections that Luke makes in this text with other texts, but time is limited, so let's recap where we are and bring this home:

- I've promised a less than thrilling, but hopefully instructive, ride and delivered on that promise.
- I've also hopefully shown you some of the connections this text makes with Israel's past, even as it points to its new future and the future of all nations.
- This is the critical point...this text stands at the electrified intersection between Israel's past and future. Where they have been, and where they are going, are enfolded in the Christ child that Simeon so joyfully holds in his arms.

We who read and study this text today are brought to that same pivot between our past selves and our future world. Hearing the song of Simeon, we stand now with him at a moment fraught with significance, like little Sofie, whose life has taken a whole new turn in the waters of baptism.

For, at this very moment, we are connected with our past, with the people and circumstances that have carried us, through our frail obedience and our wounded longing, to this very moment.

We are also shown our future, Christ's future, where there is peace, salvation, glory for all peoples.

And though these things represent our deepest hopes and desires, they require the crises of judgment, the swords that pierce through our indifference and confront us with the stark choice between God's way, truth and life in Christ, or another way, the way we have trod before.

Israel's Defense Minister and the mayor of Columbus Ohio are right, but only partially so:

There is a time for everything, but this time is the time for something that we have hoped for in lieu of that which we have known. It is the time for salvation, which we need, which the nation of Israel needs, which Hamas needs, as well as the poor and suffering in cities like Columbus, Ohio.

And essential to that salvation is not a stimulus rescue package (as important as it is), nor bomb strikes (no matter how necessary they may be tactically), but Jesus himself. Jesus, who will not be contained in that manger, but will burst forth from it with wisdom and stature, Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection will be like a sword piercing through the masses of those who might otherwise remain stuck in a past with no imagination of a better future.

Indeed, I may be right in saying that change emerges from the union of courage and desperation. For it is in God's courage in Christ to confront our desperation that we are given real change, the change on which we can rest our hopes, that God will indeed comfort God's people and shine the light of glory that is visible to all peoples.

Here today, we share in the song of Simeon and embrace this infant child, not just tender and mild, cooing quietly in the manger, but carrying in himself our past selves and our future, made bright by the light of God.

This light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot, will not, overcome it.

Thanks be to God. Amen