

What Do You Make of Him
Luke 2: 21-39

**First Presbyterian Church
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The week after Christmas is, for most of the Christian world, one of the strangest weeks of all the year. Many who have the luxury of time off don't need to wake up on time, don't need to go anywhere, don't really even need to get dressed and do much of anything beyond the bare essentials.

As a result, you're unsure of what day it is, even sometimes what year it is! The buildup to Christmas day was full of such fanfare and ceremony, such busy waiting — from live nativities to cantatas to pilgrimages to Christmas Eve service to the morning of and usually family gatherings spread out through the month, not to mention the gift buying process itself and other preparations that go on behind the scenes — that the let-down from Christmas can be pretty severe. All this busy waiting and now what? Where am I going? What am I doing? What day is it?

I can imagine that it was perhaps a similar experience for the holy couple leading up to the birth of this son. Their engagement, the announcement given to Mary of Christ's conception, the back-and-forth of Joseph finally deciding to divorce her quietly, Gabriel's appearing to Joseph to reassure him, their resolve to go through with it, roughly nine months of waiting, a wedding in the middle of it all that would have lasted days, then a census that took them many miles south to Bethlehem while nine months pregnant and, finally, the birth of the Promised One.

Now what? It's into that haze that our text today speaks, so, as we approach God's Word, let's ask his help in prayer. Almighty God and Everlasting Father, your Word is true and pure, but we are often false and mixed with distraction, unbelief, and sin. Cast out our doubting in this hour and, by your Spirit, testify in our hearts to the truth of your Scriptures. Then, for your glory and our good, impress it upon our hearts by faith that we may leave here changed, chastened, encouraged, strengthened, for we ask it in Christ's name, AMEN.

As we just read, the answer to the "what's next" of the Christmas story is fairly remarkable, though it frankly starts in rather simple terms for those who would have been alive and in that culture at the time. Mary and Joseph, we're told, do

everything in accordance with the Law, including first circumcising the child on his eighth day and then, 33 days later, offering a sacrifice in the Temple for their purification. If you noticed, Luke seems like a bit of a broken record in this passage because he records the term “Law” five times. Why such an emphasis on the Law of Moses (or, Law of the Lord)? At the very least, he’s trying to draw our attention to the first two faithful figures of this passage in Mary and Joseph.

We don’t have the time to get into the weeds with these two rituals of the Old Covenant, but suffice it to say for now that Mary and Joseph may not have read *Baby-Wise* and every other early parenting book, but they knew the book that mattered. They knew their Scriptures and were endeavoring not only to live faithful lives of their own but also to raise this child up — no matter how exceptional he was — as a member of the people of faith. Notice here in passing something that reflects our understanding of what happens in infant baptism. Male babies then, before they could speak or think for themselves, were circumcised in accordance with a rite that was roughly 2000 years old. It marked the identity of that child as, first and foremost, part of the covenant community. Not only that, but the sacrifice given for a firstborn was in recognition that all blessings — especially children — ultimately belong to God. Our children are not our own, they belong to him in a unique way and are, therefore, to be brought up as Christians. So, again, we should notice the simple faithfulness of the holy couple as they make their way through that odd first 4-6 weeks of new parenting life.

But that’s about where the conventional, normal, everyday first-century Israelite couple with a new baby boy stuff ends because in verse 25, we’re introduced to a man named Simeon. Simeon is the first of two other faithful figures that we get to know briefly in this single passage and he comes off, frankly, as a bit of an oddball. Simeon seems to just be some guy — likely older based on what we find out of him being near death — who’s a God-fearing man with one little quirk. He believes that God has told him that he will see the Messiah, the Christ, before his death. Perhaps he’s only been waiting for a few months, perhaps years, I think likely decades. He’s been in the Temple like this innumerable times and yet, little did he know as he woke up, today is the day when the thing that made him sound crazy before finally comes true.

As the holy family are performing the simple acts of faithfulness unto the Lord, he feels compelled to shuffle over to this sweet couple in the midst of the crowd, taps on Mary’s shoulder, and asks something many moderns might be shocked by. “May I hold him?” he asks. She, perhaps reluctantly, obliges and gently hands this tiny child over to this bearded old gentleman. As she does so, though maybe she

doesn't understand all the reasons why, tears come to the man's eyes. Everything he's waited for, everything he's hoped for, is right here in his arms. What did Simeon expect when the Lord told him he would see the Messiah? Perhaps he imagined a stately and powerful man offering prayers and sacrifices to the Lord. Or perhaps he didn't know what to expect. Even still, with the eyes of faith, he knew, this was it. All this waiting, all this longing, all this hoping and build-up... to a tiny child. Then, unexpected to everyone, his voice breaks out in song. Shakily and weakly at first, but growing in intensity and strength as it goes. After he sings, he gently wipes a tear from his eye, hands the boy back to his parents, and speaks a blessing over them and, before parting from them, he speaks a strange and cryptic warning directly to Mary. He speaks of what this child will do, things that will be great in the eyes of some and terrible for others. He speaks specifically about how Mary will be pierced through her own soul on his account, and no wonder.

Any mother knows that truth most poignantly, and how much more true for the mother of mothers? Not only in the normal anxieties of bearing and raising a child, but in the unique pain of seeing him betrayed, beaten, and crucified, her soul would be pierced over and over before the end. Perhaps in those years to come, Mary would remember Simeon's words and weep.

After this interaction, we're told of another faithful figure who's been there, maybe in the background, all along. Anna, the prophetess, has been constantly in the Temple for decades and decades. She's likely childless from her first and only marriage that lasted only seven years as she would have conventionally been cared for by her adult children if they were around. And, like Simeon, she's rather old. Either 84 as the ESV has indicated for us or perhaps up to 106 depending on how the original is exactly applied, but the point remains: she's been around. We don't know if she said anything but, what I imagine from us being told that she was "coming up at that very hour," is that she stumbled onto the scene, recognized Simeon and heard his song, and simply couldn't hold back any longer. She had to tell everyone, and so she did. She and Simeon represent the faithful remnant of Israel who had long awaited this day.

Before we move on to some larger points about what's going on here, do you not notice the irony of those God is continually bringing forward in this story? Mary and Joseph, both from the line of David but no longer from any noble blood outside of that ancient ancestor. They weren't even wealthy enough to afford the lamb that would perhaps more preferably be offered instead of the pigeons. And

then shepherds, the lowest of society as Christ's first witnesses and heralds. And now two, rather old, perhaps a little awkward, individuals, Simeon and Anna. This pattern is only beginning here, but let it remain enough for our purposes that the Kingdom of Christ is populated by much more than the best and brightest of Baton Rouge. To state it briefly, things are beautiful here. Homes, people, clothing, the scenery, everything. Put together and well kept. And while beauty for the glory of God is not sinful, we need to be well aware that our little bubble is far from normative. There are many we will meet in glory who would not fit neatly into the box of "our people," and it's best that we remember that.

It's these individuals that embody and exemplify simple faithfulness, a faithfulness that's almost chiefly defined by one thing: waiting. Waiting is frustrating and hard. And while we may think that we'll never have to wait for something like Simeon and Anna, our whole lives are meant to be shaped by waiting. This is at least seen in that they awaited his arrival and we await his return. And as we wait on this, the redemption of all things, we wait on many other things. What are you willing to wait for? It's been said that you tell what you really care about by what you spend your money on, but I would argue that it's even more telling to know what you're willing to wait for. So many of us, myself included, are more than happy to wait for worldly things and then expect immediate answers when the Lord places us in a season of uncertainty. There's a reason why it's repeated constantly in Scripture, so take a note from Simeon and Anna. Wait on the Lord.

Having said all that and dealt with these four individuals, we need to think a bit. We're shown from his circumcision and the sacrifices made according to the Law that Christ came to fulfill the Law and all the promises of the Old Testament. Simeon is waiting on the one who is the "consolation" of his people, meaning that he will comfort them which, in its context being pulled from Isaiah 40, means to forgive them their sins. So it is that we are told that this child will save or, literally that he will be salvation for his people and their redemption, leading them out of slavery to sin and death. He came also to unite the Jews and Gentiles in one common bond of faith as the light of revelation and glory to both.

Now each of those aspects of the mission and work of Christ could take their own sermon, but what I want us to consider in this episode more than anything else is what Simeon says of him in verses 34 and 35 as he speaks directly to Mary. He begins by saying, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel." This is something that's been pointed to for some time. In the Magnificat, Mary's song in chapter 1, she echoes Hannah's song from the Old Testament by speaking to the fact that God's pattern is to bring down the lofty and proud and to

raise up the humble and lowly. This is exactly what Jesus would do. He would speak against the self-righteous and proud of his day to cut them down and would, with the other hand, raise up the outcast, rejected, and humble sinners.

One account of this, we're told that he will be a "sign that is opposed." Earlier we mentioned how Jesus would be a unifying figure but the unity of Christ comes also with division for, as he said in Matthew 10, he came not to bring peace but a sword, to divide even those of a man's household. And this dividing work has a purpose, that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. When we are really confronted by Jesus, so much so that we must look him in the eye and not turn away, we have no choice but to be exposed, to have our thoughts, our desires, our loves revealed.

What is meant by this is the truth to which we can all attest. No person in all of history has been so divisive. He is either your Savior or your enemy, nothing between. He is simultaneously the most beloved and the most hated and reviled. Should we be surprised? And while much of that is because of who he was, I would suggest that it was more often than that his words that created a division. It was what he said.

The comfortable in this life and complacent came to him and he said that it would be easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than for rich to enter his kingdom but by God's mercy. The self-righteous came to him and he told them that they must be born again. Those who wanted to live out sinful lifestyles he called to repentance, saying, "if you love me, keep my commandments." Those who sought to make a show of religiosity without holding to the heart of God's Word came to him and he called them white-washed tombs. The list goes on. Jesus was crucified not just for who he was but also what he said, and the same is true today.

So what now? What do you make of this child? If you've been skating by assuming that you can chart a middle course with Jesus, where you can simply appreciate him as a teacher and live a decent enough life to get by at the end, don't leave without hearing the warning. He is either the rock of refuge under which you will find shelter in the storm or he is the stone of stumbling upon whom you will be crushed. There's no in-between.

Perhaps you'd be honest with me now and say that you really don't like him. He says harsh things. He's incredibly exclusive. He upholds God's law. And for that and more, you'd rather not hear about him. If you've come here today with that

attitude in mind, can I at least say that I'm glad you're here and I'm glad you're honest about it. It's better for you to acknowledge your hatred of Christ than to blithely pay lip service to him, assume that you love him, meanwhile you have no warmth for him and don't want to hear what he has to say. But can I challenge you before you leave and ask you, don't you want what he offers? Don't you see how imperfect you are? Does that not bother you, that you're not the person you want to be? Don't you see how broken this world is? Don't you feel within you an unrest and uneasiness when you consider the injustices of the world? Don't you truly desire someone to make things right, to settle accounts once and for all? You need him. I need him. You need this Christ, the one who would fulfill the law in your place, the one who brings comfort and forgiveness of sins, the one who will bind together the broken and cast down the corrupt. But unless you begin to see your own corruption as the real problem and understand that he rightly should be against you and not for you, he remains far off. You must come humbly and completely.

And as we close, I recognize many if not most of you came today in that way, however imperfect, humbly and completely. To you, I say, let this passage fill your gaze with the goodness of Christ. Yes, if you bear his name, you will be tested. The world will revile you for it for he is a sign that is opposed. But he is faithful.

So let's take some notes from the figures we saw in this passage and seek to live lives of simple obedience, emphasizing the small, not-very-flashy, normal means of God's grace that we might fulfill our mutual long obedience in the same direction. Let's strive for patience as we wait upon the Lord. Let's give thanks that we have such a Redeemer as this. And let us be ready to die well.