

## *Seeing Salvation*

*Luke 2: 21-38*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**January 5, 2014  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

---

So what do you do after you give birth to the Son of God? What happens after your birthing center is a stable, and your receiving blanket is straw? What do you do next after your midwives are shepherds and the music in your nursery is literally from angel choirs? Well, as any parent knows, after the wonder of the moment of birth there comes the shocking realization of the new normal. You can't put the baby back after a few hours of joy. He's with you to stay. And routines have to be developed, and, in the case of first century Jews, important patterns had to be followed.

After the birth of Jesus, when the angels and shepherds had gone, Mary and Joseph began the life of normal Jewish parents. Their Judaism included particular rituals that had to be enacted as a sacred part of what it meant to be the LORD's people. So we read in Luke that on his 8<sup>th</sup> day, the child was circumcised. This was the sign given to Abraham for all male children that marked them as being included in the covenant. The LORD I Am declared, "I will be your God, and you will be my people." In those days, covenants were cut more graphically than the way contracts today are merely signed. An animal was split in two to say symbolically, "May this happen to me if I do not keep my part of this covenant." Circumcision was patterned after this ancient cutting sign of covenants. It meant writing into flesh the participation of a male child in God's covenant promises.

Through the centuries, the church has found great significance in the fact that Jesus received this sign of belonging to the covenant people. He was not held apart from us. He received the bloody wound that proved he was fully enfleshed, fully human, and fully Hebrew. He underwent the cut that would become the scar that marked him as truly one of his people the Jews. The church through the centuries has also seen the circumcision of Jesus as the beginning of his suffering for our sins. This was the first bleeding of the one who would shed his life's blood for the sake of the world. Of this scene, the great English poet John Milton wrote in 1645,

Alas! How soon our sin  
Sore doth begin  
His infancy to seize!

Jesus began paying the price for us even as an infant.

The circumcision of Christ is easily overlooked, but actually it was vitally important to our understanding that the Son of God fully entered into our life in this world and gave himself utterly to our redemption.

Now at the time of circumcision, the child was also ceremonially given his name. Mary and Joseph showed that they were obedient to the word spoken to each of them by the angel. They did not name the boy Joseph after his earthly father. They gave him the name, Yeshua, Jesus, which means, “Yahweh, the LORD. Saves.” From the beginning the boy had a powerful and prophetic name. Every time they called him by name, they declared his destiny: the LORD has come to save his people.

Next, within forty days, a first born son had to be offered to the LORD. God had declared that every first born child belonged to him. But the LORD provided that an offering could be made in substitution for literally giving over the child. So Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem. Normally, the parents would offer a lamb and a dove. But Scripture provided an exception in the case of the poor. They could forego the lamb and offer two turtledoves. Mary and Joseph are thus immediately identified as a couple not of means. Theirs will be a thrifty, lean household in the years to come.

All these actions, the circumcision, the naming and the offering of the firstborn were very normal for the people of Israel. They had been going on for centuries. But in the midst of following the routine forms, Mary and Joseph discovered that God still had surprises for them.

There was an old man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. Luke tells us that Simeon had been waiting, longing, looking for years for “the consolation of Israel.” This meant that Simeon was expecting the Messiah, the LORD’s Christ, to come and set his people free from sin and oppression. Simeon was a man who entered into the lament that life in the world was not as it should be for God’s people. The Romans ruled unjustly and made life very hard. But worse, the people themselves had lost their first love for the LORD. Their leaders were more concerned with the minutia of law than devotion to the LORD who gave it as a means of relationship. Many of them had made peace with Roman rule, securing their personal wealth and position at the expense of having a vital religion that

would actually encourage the people. So Simeon pined and prayed for change. He was a man who knew the sorrow of being realistic about how hard the times were.

But Simeon was also a man of hope. He trusted that God would do what he had promised in the prophets. He would come himself to save his people. To change their hearts and restore the world. Luke tells us that Simeon was “righteous and devout.” He kept his heart centered on the LORD in devotion and his actions focused on obedience in grateful response to the LORD’s truth and goodness. This yearning, striving, grieving, hopeful man had also received a special gift, for “the Holy Spirit was upon him.” Simeon received a revelation. The Holy Spirit told Simeon that he would not see death until he had seen the LORD’s Christ. Simeon would not die until he saw the Messiah appear.

Imagine knowing that your most passionate dream would be fulfilled, if only by a glimpse, before your work on earth was done. Simeon was an old man by the time of Luke 2, and he must have been both eagerly expectant that it had to be true, and sometimes wondering if he had heard correctly. I wonder if there were some days when Simeon felt he had simply lived long enough. Did he feel used up, like a shell of a man waiting to be discarded, wishing he did not have to wait any longer for release? But maybe every time he wanted to quit, faith surged up in him, and he remembered the voice he heard within. Perhaps then he submitted himself to whatever small role he would play in seeing the LORD’s Christ revealed. So Simeon lived both with the aches and pains of age and with the pins and needles of vibrant faith. He lived with his eyes peeled, ready to respond.

Well, at the same time that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple, the Holy Spirit prompted Simeon to go there too. When he saw the baby, the Spirit let him know that here was the Christ, the consolation of Israel. I wonder if Simeon had been expecting a full grown Messiah. Was he surprised to see only a month old baby? If so, he didn’t let surprise stop him. The gospel tells us that Simeon took up the child in his arms. He rushed over and stretched forth his hands to receive the child. Mary and Joseph were by now accustomed to new wonders. They let this strange, eager old man hold their baby.

This is a scene that has been portrayed in Christian art through the centuries. The old man inclines his head over the infant in his arms. Simeon looks at Jesus as only the very old can look at the very young. He beholds him with all the years between them, all the decades that separate his lined and aged face from the newborn softness of Jesus’ cheek. Simeon looks at Jesus with the wonder of a

grandparent who realizes life goes on, and we live on through these babies. But he also looked at Jesus with the wonder of a man beholding his God. Simeon beheld the infant Jesus and realized he was seeing the likeness of his heavenly Father. The old man was but a baby before the Ancient of Days he held in his arms. So, when Simeon prayed, in his voice one could hear all the love of a grandfather for a grandchild, and all the love of a young child for his father.

Luke tells us that Simeon blessed God. He held the baby and blessed the LORD who had kept his promise. His life was fulfilled. Simeon's blessing prayer is very famous, and has been used in Christian prayers for centuries.

Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,  
According to your word;  
For my eyes have seen your salvation  
That you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
A light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
And for glory to your people Israel.

Simeon rejoiced in the LORD. "Now I can die in peace, because my eyes have seen what you have promised. You fulfilled your word, O God. You sent salvation, a salvation for your people Israel, and a salvation that will reach to the ends of the earth. This is what we have been yearning for. You are the God who keeps his Word and redeems his people. Blessed are you!"

Simeon saw that the glory of Israel was here: forever the world would bless Israel. For the Savior is a Jew. The LORD incarnate is a Hebrew. Israel has sired the King. And here was news for the nations. Your desire for everlasting life is here now. Your yearning for intimacy with God can be fulfilled. Your groping for redemption, meaning, hope can find out the truth in this child. All you most deeply long for can be found in the child I am holding. Here is life for the world.

Then the old man, still holding the child, turned to Mary and Joseph. While they were still marveling at the prayer Simeon had prayed over Jesus, Simeon blessed the parents. As a guy very interested in the Biblical patterns of blessing, I love this story. Simeon was in the blessing loop. He received the blessing of God through faithful trust in God's promises. When he saw their fulfillment, Simeon blessed God with that lovely prayer. Then he turned and blessed others as a faithful, thankful response. He blessed these young parents, speaking in words the shining favor of God upon them as they undertook the awesome task of raising the Son of God.

Then Simeon spoke to Mary specifically. The words were a prophecy whose fulfillment would not be easy.

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 the thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.

We would like to think that when God sends a savior, everyone would be happy. What could be better news than the light of the world? But we humans love darkness rather than light. We would rather do it our way than admit our need to be saved. We do not give over control of our lives easily. Jesus would be the foundation and cornerstone of a new humanity. He would also be the stumbling block over which the proud would fall.

This rejection of Jesus would create particular pain for Mary. Every parent knows something of this. To raise a child is to invite a sword to pierce your soul. Sooner or later, it will happen. Having children is a great joy; it's also a guaranteed piercing. And for Mary, the rejection, betrayal, and murder of Jesus would rend her very heart. Nowhere is this more poignantly captured in art than in Michelangelo's *Pieta*. The limp form of Jesus in Mary's arms rends our souls as we look at it. We collapse in the sorrow of it, even as we are amazed that such fluidity was rendered in marble stone. The genius in the sculpture is magnified when we realize that Michelangelo portrays Mary with such a young face. He is reaching back to these very words of Simeon to Mary with baby Jesus when she was but a teenager. At the beginning, the end was known. Oh Mary, in three decades you will hold this child in your arms, grown a man, grown to be spurned by those he came to save, grown to die for the world. We often speak of the courage it took for Mary and Joseph to trust the miraculous conception of Jesus. But think of the courage it took to raise him to adulthood, to behold his ministry, and his disgrace! Ah, Mary, a sword will pierce your own soul also.

How Mary and Joseph must have wondered at the deep things of God as they returned home! How they must have pondered the old man's words! Simeon declared that he had seen salvation as he held their baby in his arms. All he had longed for had been fulfilled. All the world ever wanted was there within the swaddling cloths. What the LORD promised, he fulfilled. Now your servant can depart in peace.

This year of 2014 is in its infancy. Its promise lies before us. Will we give ourselves to what matters most? Will we live deeply from the true source? From the Desire of Nations, the light of the world, the child who bled to give us life?

Yes, a new year lies open before us. Full of fresh starts and hopes. It is likely that, one way or another, swords of some kind will pierce us in body or soul. The way of the cross was the way of life for our Jesus and it is the way of life for us as well. Our God has fully entered this world. He was circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, and dedicated at the temple on the fortieth. He was born under the law and all the forms and requirements of daily life, so that he might redeem it all. Seeing him, we see salvation.

So let this be the year when we do not turn our gaze to worthless things. This will be the year we commit to gazing daily at the desire of nations. We will go to him in his Word and look at him until we feel afresh that he is all we most long for. We will trust that the God who began a good work in us will continue it. Not only in us, but in the world he came to save. We will look daily at him until we hear him send us forth into the world to bless, to serve and to love.