

The Second Baptist Pulpit

“Peace Disturbed”

Luke 2:22-40

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We have celebrated in every way we know how *the good news of great joy for all the people: that unto us is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This is the sign: we find a baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

And there are angels and the heavenly host and people who only come to church twice a year saying, *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*

The Word became flesh. The creative and sustaining power of the universe became a baby.

There's not a whole lot in the Bible about what happened next to Jesus and Mary and Joseph after the shepherds went back out into the fields.

What did they do next?

The best we've got is Luke 2:22-40. We are indebted to Luke for giving us a text that speaks to us after shepherds,

angels, and heavenly hosts are gone.

The Christmas story has such simplicity and peace and sweetness to it. The baby in the manger and the shepherds and the farm animals. The starlight and angels. Silent Night. And then we have this scene today that continues in that peaceful and simple vein.

Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem for the required Mosaic ritual of purification. Part of their responsibility here was to offer a sacrifice. Different sacrificial offerings were acceptable, depending on the parents' economic situation. In Mary and Joseph's case, given their modest, if not poor, circumstances, the acceptable sacrifice was two turtledoves.

And there in the temple that day were two interesting characters. There was Simeon—an old man harboring a vast hope. Simeon has been waiting all his life for this child. It was promised to him that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah.

The other person there was Anna. She was, like Simeon, a prophet. She was an old woman who had spent a lifetime in the temple. She stayed at the temple night and day, fasting and praying. And when she saw the

baby Jesus, she began to praise God and speak to all those there about this child who would bring redemption to Jerusalem.

As for Simeon, he took Jesus in his arms and praised God saying, *Master, now you can let your servant depart in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.* And Mary and Joseph were amazed at what the old man was saying. Who doesn't like to hear people compliment their baby? And then Simeon turned and blessed Mary and Joseph, too.

What a moment—another beautiful, sweet, peaceful moment for Mary, Joseph, and the baby. It reminds us of our own parent-child dedication services that we do from time to time.

If only Simeon had stopped there.

Listen to how Frederick Buechner once described this scene: *Years before, [Simeon had] been told he wouldn't die till he'd seen the Messiah with his own two eyes, and time was running out. When the moment finally came, one look through his cataract lenses was all it took. He asked if it would be all right to hold the baby in his arms, and they told him to go ahead but be careful not to drop him.*

"Lord, now let thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation," he said (Luke 2:29), the baby playing with the fringes of his beard. The parents were pleased as punch, so he blessed them too for good measure. Then something about the mother stopped him, and his expression changed.

What he saw in her face was a long way off, but it was there so plainly he couldn't pretend. "[This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel... and a] sword will pierce through your soul," he said (Luke 2:35).

He would have rather bitten off his tongue than said it, but in that holy place he felt he had no choice. Then he handed her back the baby and departed in something less than the perfect peace he'd dreamed of all the long years of his waiting. ["Simeon," Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who's Who, p. 175-6]

Peace disturbed.

It's always interesting to notice all the different Christmas displays that people put in their yards. Mostly you just see lights on houses, but some peo-

ple put out nativity scenes or other displays.

The other day in our neighborhood I noticed in one person's yard they had a large wooden manger. You could see it had hay in it. It was very nice looking, well done. And then there was something behind the manger that startled me. Behind the manger was a huge wooden cross, probably ten feet high.

And there was something about the proximity of the manger and that cross that disturbed me. I even made some comment as we drove by about the baby and the cross. Babies and crosses don't go together. To tell you the truth, I found it a little distasteful.

There is an unmistakable romanticism grows up around Christmas. The symbols and music and candles work their magic, and our hearts are warmed and our spirits lifted a bit, and we find ourselves beginning to hope that maybe things will work out all right after all. And so much of that romanticism centers on the child asleep in the hay, on the hope, the wonder, and the love connected with the birth of this child. My reaction to that manger in the front yard with the huge cross behind it represents a clash with that romanticism—

that desire we may have to just leave the cross out of it. Can't we just have the baby and the shepherds and the three wise men and leave that ugly cross business out of it?

In that sense, these words of Simeon about this baby leading to the falling and rising of many and about a sword piercing Mary's soul may startle us into an unwanted realism. But what Simeon's words do more than anything else is demonstrate with inescapable clarity the intimate connection between the manger and the cross.

Brooks Ramsey was the first pastor of this church. And in one of his sermons back in 1965 he put it this way: *We want the comforts of religion, but we don't want the costs of religion. We want the romance of religion, but we don't want the responsibilities of religion. We like to hear God Almighty say to us, you have got a mansion in the sky in the future...but I have discovered in my ministry that when you sincerely try to do a work for God, it is going to cost you something.*

Jesus said to his disciples, "If any man would be my disciple, let him deny self and take up his cross and follow me."... A crossless religion is a Christless religion.

And to me those words have added power because, if you know Brooks and know about his life, you know that he was speaking from experience. And that in the days and years ahead he would continue to sincerely try to work for God and find out again and again that there is a real cost.

And so old Simeon's peace at seeing the baby was disturbed as he saw what was ahead—and he spoke of falling and rising and a sword piercing Mary's soul.

Just a baby, Jesus was, but hardly safe or harmless. *This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many*, Simeon said. This child provokes a crisis, a decision, for Simeon, for Anna, for every person of every generation who encounters him. And how we respond to this one baby decides everything.

The stakes are not trivial. It's not that, if we go with Jesus, our lives are 17 percent better, our happiness 14 percent higher, our marriages 16 percent healthier. It's not like that. It's all or nothing. You fall. Or you rise.

Notice the order. In the world, it's rise and fall. You know, we use that phrase all the time.

The rise and fall of Adolf Hitler.

The rise and fall of the business tycoon. The rise and fall of the celebrity. The rise and fall of the professional athlete. It's a common story—a story of achieving great success and then stumbling and falling. A common phrase: rise and fall.

But with Jesus, it's the opposite: fall and rise.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit (John 12:24). Jesus did not fly straight to heaven once danger came. He suffered and died and *then* was raised to glory.

We suffer and die and not just at the end of life. *I have been crucified with Christ*, Paul said. I bear the death of Christ now. I deny myself. We fall, and from that lowest point, we rise. We fall...and then rise.

[James C. Howell, "Theological Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1, P.164-8*]

Our friend Kyle Matthews, the songwriter and performer who has been here at our church a couple of times, has that great song that he has sung here, "We Fall Down." In the song Kyle tells the story of a man, struggling along with daily life, look-

ing at a monastery as he passes it by, wondering how those holy men live.

Finally, he sees one of the monks by the gate, and he asks the monk what they do all day. And this holy man says: *We fall down, and we get up. We fall down, and we get up.* And then he says something that is so crucial for all of us to understand. He says, *The saints are just the sinners who fall down...and get up.*

We fall, and we rise, we fall and rise, fall and rise.

We normally talk about the rise and fall, but when the peace of the manger is disturbed by the shadow of the cross, you begin to realize that Jesus turns everything backwards—and it becomes the fall and rise.

Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

Those who love their life will lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Those who are willing to follow Jesus in letting themselves fall—those are the ones who will truly rise.

Perhaps you are familiar with the story of Amahl and the Night Visitors. The three wise men are on their way to Bethlehem, and they come to the home of a poor woman who has a little boy name Amahl. Amahl is crippled; he could not walk without a crutch.

One evening their humdrum existence was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door. His mother said to Amahl, *Go see who is at the door.*

He went and came back and said, *Momma, a king is there.* She lashed out at him with her tongue for exaggerating so much and sent him back to the door. He came back a second time and said, *There are two kings out there.* He was in big trouble now. So for a third time she sent him to the door and he said, *Momma, there are three kings.*

After much conversation the three wise men come in. She was very impressed with them, especially the gold, which she tried to steal. But in the uproar of her attempted theft, one of the wise men, noticing her plight of need, says to her, *You can keep the gold. The babe we are going to worship does not need it.*

But then, she gets caught up in the spirit of generosity and says, *I would never keep that gold. Take it to the baby king, and if I had anything to send myself, I would do it.*

Then comes that most poignant and moving moment when Amahl, sensing that he has nothing to send but wanting to send something important says, *I will send my crutch.* The one thing that was indispensable to him, he was going to give away. So he lifted up his crutch and gave it to the wise men.

He gave what we had, the thing that held him up and kept him from falling. And then a miracle occurred. His mother noticed first that he could walk now. He could stand alone, without his crutch. He was healed, he was made whole.

Amahl didn't rise by sentimentally giving homage to the baby in the manger, but by taking up his cross—by taking the risk to let himself fall. It was when he was willing to lose his life that he found it, when he was willing to let go of the crutch that kept him from falling that he was able to rise.

When we give ourselves away in the service of a greater cause, for the kingdom of God on earth and the good of others, when we

lose ourselves, when we fall,
that is when we experience the
lifting up of God's salvation.

The shadow of the cross dis-
turbed Simeon's long-awaited
peace on seeing the baby Jesus.
And he felt compelled to speak
those disturbing words to Mary:
*This child is destined for the
falling and rising of many in
Israel, and to be a sign that will
be opposed... and a sword will
pierce your own soul too.*

Perhaps Mary shuddered at
Simeon's words.

It is moving to think back on
Mary, feeling Jesus kick in her
womb, hearing his first cry,
watching his first steps. He
grew and became strong, filled
with wisdom; and the favor of
God was upon him. He left
home and gathered a following.
But wicked men turned against
her son, who was good, pure, all
love.

Mary had to watch as Simeon's
prophecy was fulfilled. Her
heart broke—her own soul
pierced— as she saw the life-
blood she had given him drain
out of his body.

The fall. But then the rise.

Who, among all who witnessed
Jesus risen from the dead was

more joyful to see him alive
than his own mother?
[James C. Howell]

And we share in that joy, as we
share in his birth... but also as
we share in his fall and in his
rise.

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