

The King: Peace from a Sword

Luke 2:21-39

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A few years back a violinist played in a New York subway station with his case open collecting tips. A few people stopped to listen, a couple clapped, and he made \$32.17 in 45 minutes. What people didn't realize was that this was a social experiment, and the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the world's most famous fiddlers. And he was playing a 3.5-million-dollar Strate Vera violin. And only days earlier he had sold out a Boston theater where tickets averaged over \$100 each. But in the subway, nobody even noticed.¹

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We are in Luke 2 again today. If you've got a Bible I encourage you to follow along. We will be picking it up in verse 21. Would you stand with me as we come before God's word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Luke 2:21-39]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

One of the dominant themes in Luke's Christmas story is how, other than by a few social-outcast shepherds, the first Christmas came and went with hardly any recognition. Mary and Joseph were just another poor peasant couple at the temple to have their child dedicated with all the other parents who had kids at this time. Everything seemed incredibly un-incredible about them and their child. Kind of like a busker in a subway. But if you know what you are looking at it's a different story.

And what we bump into today are two people who do know what they are looking at. And what we see through them is that God always gives peace to those who wait, but it's peace with a sword, but that's the peace we need.² That's where we're going.

First, God always gives peace to those who wait. So the main characters in today's text are Simeon and Anna. Luke describes Simeon saying:

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. (Luke 2:25-26)

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnOPu0_YWhw (Accessed December 20, 2024)

² Works consulted: Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/peace-through-conflict-christmas/>; J.D. Greear <https://summitchurch.com/message/the-christmas-we-werent-expecting> and Tuck Bartholomew <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/jesus-our-salvation/>

And after seeing Jesus Simeon prays “Now I can die in peace because I’ve seen God’s salvation. A few verses later Luke describes Anna saying:

Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple... and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshiping God with fasting and prayer. (Luke 2:37-38)

So Simeon and Anna are both very old. Now I happen to know that some of you would object to Luke’s use of the term “very old” for an 84-year-old lady. Like 84 is still spring chicken, right? But actually the Greek is a little vague here, and many commentaries think Anna was actually married 7 years and then widowed for 84, which would put her somewhere around 105. So I think you can let go of your offense. She’s old.

But here’s the point, both Simeon and Anna are people who have spent their lives waiting for God to show up. Fasting and praying and longing for God to bring the peace He had promised, and not seeing it happen for decades. How do you respond when God doesn’t answer your prayers? I mean how many are in the I-can-pray-for-decades-with-no-problem group? How many are in the When-I-pray-about-something-for-15-minutes-I-deserve-a-medal group? Most of us are not that good at waiting.

Last Valentine’s Day Nikki and I were at a restaurant and ended up getting our meal for free after waiting an hour for our food. Now I was with a pretty lady, so I was fine, but it is appalling to wait like that, and everyone knew it, so the manager comped our \$200 bill.

And we are used to this kind of thing. We are used to getting what we order in good time. And we bring this expectation with us to God. “God, I’ve been being faithful and praying; I’ve been praying for You to bring my family member back to faith; I’ve been praying for work, I’ve been praying for a special someone to come into my life – and God You’re not answering.

But here Simeon and Anna show us that it’s through waiting that we receive God’s peace. God actually appoints waiting because without it there is no faith. See faith grows as we learn to trust God even when He doesn’t give us what we want. And Advent reminds us about this. Our whole lives are about waiting for Christ to return and make all things new and right every wrong. But until then we wait and wait.

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But there’s blessing in the waiting – there’s peace. You see God knew Simeon and Anna had waited a long time for His answer, and He hadn’t forgotten them, and God hasn’t forgotten you either. But it’s often in the waiting that we get what God has for us. And this message is all over scripture. So for example in Lamentations, Jeremiah says:

The Lord is good to those who wait for Him. (Lamentations 3:25)

And in Isaiah God tells us:

“Those that wait for Me shall not be put to shame.” (Isaiah 49:23)

So if you've been seeking God without answer don't despair. God will not disappoint those who wait. God never lets down those who wait for Him. Not even one. And you won't be the first. So don't despair when things stay broken. Pray, and wait trusting that God is working.

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But here we have to stop, because what I'm thinking at this moment is, "Okay, I've got some needs and I'm praying for them, and God hasn't answered as quickly as I would like, but since He's going to answer I can wait. I'll wait God out. And eventually God will give me what I want.

But that's not what we see in this text. What we get next is so shocking and unnerving it unravels all the warm fuzzies of Christmas. See, in verse 25 Luke says Simeon had been "waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel." And in verse 38 Luke says Anna "had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem."

Now we know from history that what the Jews were waiting for was God to send a Messiah who would show up in power and win peace for Israel by defeating their enemies. So that's what Simeon and Anna were praying for. But that wasn't what God was doing. He was doing something else. And what we get next in this text is so uncomfortable it almost always gets overlooked in the Christmas story. But we see it in the prophesy of Simeon in verse 34. Luke says:

Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, "This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, and many others to rise. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose Him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul." (Luke 2:34-35)

Simeon says the peace God has for His people comes with a sword. Now this is not how you bless a mom and new baby. I mean we've got some new moms here and what you are supposed to say to moms is "You're stronger than you know." "You're doing a great job." What you aren't supposed to say is "Boy, your child is going to cause the rise and fall of many, and a sword is going to pierce your soul too." That doesn't sound like peace.

But here we see that with Jesus God was bringing peace to earth, but He was doing it by picking a fight. The peace Jesus was bringing was peace that would come with a sword.

Now the sword God brings isn't the sword of a warrior it's more like the knife of a surgeon. But it still cuts. And if you didn't know who the fiddler was, he would look like any other busker. And if you didn't know what a surgeon was it would look like he was hurting his patient. And in a similar way the peace Jesus brings is not at all what anyone expected. Jesus' peace came with a sword.

See Jesus is the great divider. He comes to expose hearts and incite opposition which will cause people to rise and fall.

In other words, when people encounter Jesus, they either kneel in worship or knot up in rebellion, but nobody gets left in the middle. Jesus polarizes people. But why? What causes this? It's because in Jesus we get both His overwhelmingly repulsive claims and His overwhelming attractive life.³ And it's these two things together that polarize everyone who encounters Jesus.

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But hold on, most people in Canada aren't polarized about Jesus. To be polarised means to either love Him or hate Him. But if you ask Canadians whether they love Jesus or hate Him they will say – that's a false dilemma. I don't love Him or hate Him, I'm neutral. Jesus says some great stuff, I'm just not convinced He was God.

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In the last two hundred years there has been a ton written on what is called "The historical Jesus." And this is the idea that there was a man named Jesus who lived 2000 years ago, but He wasn't God, and didn't do miracles. And so the thing with Jesus is not to worry too much about who He thought He was – because He obviously thought He was the Messiah. The important thing is to dig into what He taught about the potential for grace and love we all have inside ourselves.

Now Bart Ehrman is one of the big Historical Jesus theologians today; he makes his living writing books about Jesus, but he isn't a Christian. And in a blog titled "why I'm not a Christian" he says, while Jesus was a great teacher, he was ultimately confused about Himself. He thought He was the Messiah, and that through Him the kingdom of God was going to come in power and bring cosmic judgment against all evil and set up a good kingdom on earth. And He believed that "this generation would not pass away before all these things take place." But, Ehrman says, obviously that didn't happen. So while Jesus was great, ultimately, he wasn't the saviour of the world.⁴

Now this sounds super sophisticated, but the problem with Ehrman's idea is that it assumes the most preposterous thing Jesus said was that He was going to initiate the Kingdom of God. But the truth is Jesus was constantly saying preposterous things. So Jesus said "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness" – that's John 8. And Jesus said "I am the door, if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved" – that's John 10. And Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies" – that's John 11. And Jesus says "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me" – that's John 14. So Jesus was constantly making ultimate claims about Himself.

³ This section adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/peace-through-conflict-christmas/> (Accessed December 19, 2024)

⁴ <https://ehrmanblog.org/why-i-am-not-a-christian/> (Accessed December 21, 2024)

So Ehrman's claim that Jesus was a great guy who just got the Kingdom of God wrong is crazy. If I say "2+2 is 5 and I own you because I'm the God of the universe" you don't say "Wow, Dan is bad at math but he's a great guy." You say, "Dan is a megalomaniac and who cares what he thinks about math!"

So the only way to be neutral about Jesus is to have concocted your own idea about who He is. Anyone who has actually met Jesus either loves and worships Him or hates and rejects Him. And this is what we see happening in the Gospels.

So Mark is the earliest Gospel. It was written just 30 years after the resurrection. And Mark is all about people trying to figure out who Jesus is. So they ask questions like, "Who is this that even the wind and waves obey Him?" And "Who is this who forgives sin?" But nowhere in Mark does anyone say "I don't care who He is, I just like that He teaches me a lot about my potential."

I mean could you imagine someone watching Jesus calm the storm and responding "wow, Jesus is such a great teacher." No! Everyone who rubbed shoulders with Jesus either hated Him or worshipped Him. Nobody thought He was just a great teacher because the things He said weren't great teachings. By themselves His teachings were scandalous.

I mean have you read the Sermon on the Mount? At the end Jesus essentially says, "everyone who hears these words of Mine and puts them into practice will have abundant life now and forever, but everyone who doesn't do what I say is like a fool who builds his house on sand. You're going to fail at life now and then go to hell." That's not a nice thing to say, but Jesus says tons of stuff like this.

So Jesus tells the rich young ruler "I have to be more important to you than all your money or else everything in your life is worthless and you're damned." Jesus says "If your eye causes you to sin poke it out because it's not worth it to let anything in your life get between you and Me."

See nobody who actually met Jesus thought He could just be a great teacher who maybe got a few things wrong about the Kingdom of God. Nobody. The only way to hold a neutral position on Jesus is to have never met Him at all because Jesus' message of peace with God came with a sword.

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Well, if Jesus was so divisive, then why didn't people just write Him off as crazy? I mean lots of crazy people have claimed ludicrous things and nobody made up a religion about them. So if Jesus was always saying crazy things why didn't people just write Him off?

Well, it's because Jesus didn't just make obnoxiously huge claims, He also lived an incredibly attractive life. And it is these two things together in Jesus that force the polarized response.

Think about it, there are lots of humble and kind people running around, but none of them claim to be God. And there are tons of arrogant narcissists who think they are awesome but none of them are humble and kind. In the history of humanity there has never been anyone who said the things Jesus said, and then lived how Jesus lived.

I mean Buddha didn't claim to be God, he just taught people how to be enlightened. He was a great teacher. And Muhammad didn't claim to be God, he just taught people how to get to God. He was a great teacher. But Jesus claimed to be God wearing skin and then went around defending widows and orphans, healing sick outcasts and forgiving sinners. The only thing Jesus can't be accused of is just being a great teacher.

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And so, within a few years of His death and resurrection thousands of Jews, who we saw last week were the least likely people on earth to think God could become a man, were either worshipping Him as Christians or hating Him and killing His people.

It was exactly what Simeon prophesied – Jesus had caused the rise and fall of everyone who encountered Him. And the only reason most Canadians are neutral on Jesus is that they've never actually met Him at all.

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Now, the challenge of Simeon's prophecy isn't just for non-believers, it's for all of us. See the question is, "has your Jesus made you rise in worship and live your life for His glory, or fall in rebellion and reject everything He is about? Or are you pretty moderate in the way you follow Jesus? Sure you believe in Him, He just doesn't get to tell you what to do with your money or your relationships or your time. Has Jesus made a neutral impact on your life? Luke says if you haven't been polarized by Jesus then you probably haven't met Him no matter what you believe. So have you met Jesus? Have you felt the sting of His sword?

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Well, what is this sting? Simeon says one more thing to Mary that gives insight into what this sting is and leads us to the grace we need to receive it. He says:

"As a result (of Jesus causing people to rise or fall), the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul." (Luke 2:35)

Now of course Simeon is prophesying that Mary is going to hurt. Her son is going to die for the sin of the world. But it's not just Mary who gets this sword, it's everyone who trusts in Jesus. See everyone who receives Jesus' peace with God has to be wounded or pierced by His sword.

So what is the wound that Jesus' peace requires? It's the wound of repentance.

See the gospel is that anyone can come to God no matter what they've done because our peace with God is based on what Jesus did on our behalf. Because Jesus lived a perfect life and died a perfect death, if you will trust in Him then when God looks at you He looks through Christ. If you trust in Jesus, then when the Father looks at you, He sees perfection. And that's the peace with God Jesus bought.

But lots of people say “Oh man, that’s too easy. But it’s not easy at all. See to receive the peace with God Jesus bought, you have to repent, and that’s the hardest thing in the world.

Tim Keller says, “The only thing you need in order to come to God in repentance is nothing, but most people don’t have nothing.” Most people think they are good. But Christian repentance means admitting not only that you’ve done bad things, but that your very heart is so bad that even the good things you’ve done are tainted. To repent means to accept that you are in fact the sinner God says you are. And this is the wound of Jesus’ sword. And no one receives the peace with God Jesus offers unless they are cut by this sword.

But hear this, the sword Jesus wields is not a warrior’s sword, it’s a surgeon’s knife. Jesus cuts to heal He wants the abundant life of peace for you that you’ve been desiring all along. And this is what Simeon tastes. This is why he can say:

Sovereign Lord, now let Your servant die in peace,
as You have promised. I have seen Your salvation (Luke 2:29-30)

Get this, nothing had changed about Simeon’s circumstances. His prayers for a military messiah hadn’t been answered; Israel was still under Roman rule. And Anna was still an old widow. And yet they were both at peace because in Jesus they had received what God had for them, and it was more than they’d ever wanted. And He’s got the same for you.

So are you at peace this Christmas? Maybe you’ve been disappointed by God. You’ve had expectations He hasn’t met. Maybe you’ve prayed and He hasn’t answered. But will you trust Him and wait knowing that He is the only person in history who said He is the peace with God you need, and then gave up His life in your stead.

Have you actually met this Jesus? Or have you walked right past Him in the subway because He doesn’t look like the Jesus in your head? You’ll know which one it is because the real Jesus polarizes everyone He meets, and only people who have never met Him can remain neutral.

So are you at peace this Christmas? Have you repented knowing that you really are a sinner so bad that when it came to you the only option the God of the universe had was to die in your place. But you are so loved that it was His joy to do it. Have you been pierced by that sword? Have you met that Jesus?