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FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS December 28, 2014

“So Soon the Shadows Fall”

(Luke 2:34-35)

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*“And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother,
‘Behold, this child is destined to cause the falling and rising
of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken
against . . . And a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk.
2:34-35).*

Collect of the Day

O God, our Maker and Redeemer, You wonderfully created us and in the incarnation of Your Son yet more wondrously restored our human nature. Grant that we may ever be alive in Him who made Himself to be like us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

If you had never read the Gospels before, and were thoroughly unacquainted with the story of Jesus' life and ministry, his death and resurrection, if this was all brand new to you, and the only thing you have read thus far is the account of his birth and the visitation of the angels to the shepherds, I suspect in your mind you would be making great predictions about how this story would unfold. Jesus would grow up to be a great king you might think, and would save his people from outside oppression. He would be strong and brilliant and victorious. At least that's the way the birth sets us up.

Any reader of Luke up to this point could be easily forgiven for believing the rest of the story would be more of the same, more glory, more celebration, more of everything unfolding according to a great and glorious plan. And indeed, we want to linger in Bethlehem among the angels and shepherds, but Luke won't let us. Too soon he propels the story forward. And so we find ourselves in the temple of Jerusalem along with Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus. They are there to fulfill the law by making sacrifice 40 days after giving birth. And they are intersected by an elderly man named Simeon. With him, the scene and the mood changes.

Simeon and his prophecy start out just the way we think they should. He takes the infant up in his arms and gives thanks to God and begins to speak as the angels had before him, and as Zechariah and Mary had in chapter 1. So far, so good! It's the same tone and tenor. "Lord, now let you servant depart in peace, according to you word, for my eyes have you're your salvation that you have prepared in

the presence of all peoples.” And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. Joseph and Mary are thrilled to hear the next wonderful thing prophesied about their little boy.

But then comes a cold splash of water. Simeon turns to Mary and says, “Behold, this child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel.” Which is to say some would receive him, others will oppose and reject him, and that will have devastating consequences. Simeon continues and says many will speak against him as a sign. They will speak hatefully of him. Jesus will have enemies, even among his own people. No one saw that coming. No Jewish person at the time ever expected the Messiah would be rejected by the very people he came to save!

And then Simeon has a personal note to Mary: “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” That is, Mary would discover that loving him would bring deep anguish and pain. Which takes us right to the cross, where we don’t want to go just yet, but that’s where Mary would have to watch her son suffer and die, standing there beside his cross as his life slipped away in the agony of crucifixion.

So soon the shadows fall upon the life of this newborn infant!

As a man, Jesus would tell his disciples this is why he came, to suffer and die, but it would be one of the most difficult lessons his disciples would have to learn. They would resist it. But, in fact, the suffering and the death would prove to be the most important part of the story of Jesus.

Luke and the others writing about the life of Jesus always seem to be rushing toward that, and pushing us forward as well, not giving us the details we would like, but on to the next town, the next healing, the next test . . . until, that is, the last two or three days of his life. Then the writers slow down, and give us an almost hour by hour narrative.

The Apostle’s Creed does the same, and moves abruptly from his birth directly to his crucifixion. “He was born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was

crucified, died and was buried.”

And, of course, after the four gospels, the rest of the New Testament makes clear that our faith does not revolve around the circumstances of his birth. That’s not where we find the truest meaning of the life of Jesus. Instead, it’s in his terrible, cruel and utterly unjust death, a death to which he surrendered himself for our sakes. *That* was the purpose of his coming. He said himself, “The son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45). Paul simply says, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23). And if we fail to preach Christ crucified, even on Christmas Eve or the 1st Sunday after Christmas, then we’ve missed the point entirely.

The opening paragraphs of Luke do not reveal the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. However, with our text today, the fog is starting to lift, and what’s ahead on the road is beginning to take shape. The triumph and glory would come eventually, but first there must be the opposition and the piercing sword.

Any thoughtful Christian will know that pattern from the life of Jesus becomes the pattern for us too. Suffering precedes glory. Affliction and sorrow, pain and death precede the triumph of resurrection and eternal life.

This isn’t just about our bodies that will wear out and die and then be raised incorruptible. Remember what Jesus told his disciples? “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you . . . If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you” (Jn. 15:18,20). And Acts 14 says “. . . through many tribulations we enter the kingdom of God” (v. 22). Suffering precedes glory for Jesus and for those who follow Jesus.

In April of 1944, two months before the D-Day landings, C.S. Lewis spoke to a large audience of British factory workers. A set of questions had been prepared in advance and he answered them one by one. The transcribed shorthand notes of his remarks make for fascinating reading. It was a time of terrible suffering in Europe and Great Britain. People were worried. People were grieving. They

had no idea how much more pain awaited them.

Among the questions asked that day was this one: “Which of the religions of the world gives to its followers the greatest happiness?” C.S. Lewis thought about it a moment and answered, “While it lasts, the religion of worshiping oneself is the best.” He added, “I have an elderly acquaintance of about eighty, who has lived a life of unbroken selfishness and self-admiration from the earliest years, and is, I regret to say, one of the happiest men I know.” Lewis continued, “As you perhaps know, I haven’t always been a Christian. I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity. ” (God in the Dock, 58-59).

That’s all Lewis said on that occasion, but I think any careful listener would have picked up the powerful nuance in his words, “While it lasts . . .” “*While it lasts*, the religion of worshiping oneself is the best” if the goal is to be happy. The point is that religion will not last. Sooner or later that idol will fall to the ground and shatter and then what’s left?

Christ endured suffering knowing his suffering wouldn’t last forever, and that it opened the way to everlasting life for us. And so the author of Hebrews writes, “For the joy set before him Jesus endured the cross, suffering its shame. . .” (Heb. 12:2).

And so there’s the pattern for us again. In this life, we will suffer, physically for sure, but we will also be rejected for our faith. No Christian who takes the faith seriously gets out of this life unscathed. There will be suffering and rejection.

Simeon’s prophecy points to this suffering of Jesus, and this is the first outright notice we get of it in Luke: Jesus will be opposed, persecuted, and finally executed. Those who follow him and join his cause will also suffer, though not so horribly. That is what Simeon so clearly predicts: not just Jesus, but Mary too will suffer because she loves her son. And so it has been for all who have loved her son ever

since. He is called “The Man of Sorrows” (Is. 53:3), and his followers are described as “sorrowful but always rejoicing” (2 Cor. 6:10).

Mary’s faith did not shelter her from suffering. She became a widow fairly early, and then she watched her beloved firstborn – about whom the angels had spoken so grandly – she watched as he was hated, reviled, shamed, and finally put to death in the most shameful and tortuous way then imaginable. Her faith did not shelter her from any of that.

A superficial reading of Luke 1 and the first part of 2 would prompt one to think the whole world will soon be following Jesus from one victory to the next. But Simeon’s prophecy throws a monkey wrench into that fantasy.

So soon Luke forces us to take a serious view of things. Nothing trivial, nothing frivolous, nothing superficial or sentimental here. Already the shadows of opposition, suffering, and death have fallen on Jesus . . . but it’s for us, for our forgiveness, for our redemption, for our salvation.

If love is measured by what one is willing to pay for it, then the immeasurable suffering of Jesus for you speaks of his immeasurable love for you. And so our calling today is to lift up our hearts and bless the Lord for the salvation that cost Jesus so much suffering.

Our joys notwithstanding (and our joys are many) . . . but we too will walk in the way our Savior went. Luke will tell us we ought never to expect that a servant would be greater than his master.

There are those here today that are suffering and in sorrow, some with burdens you have carried a long time already, others from hearts that have recently been broken, or struck with fear. It is as we can expect it to be in a world wrecked by sin and death.

And for the Christian, for the follower of Jesus, there is always this: “weeping may last through the night, but joy comes in the morning” (Ps. 30:5). Amen.

