

Sermon Text: Luke 1:46-55 and Luke 2:25-35

Meditation on Mary

There is a little noticed actor in Jesus' birth, the very spirit of God. The spirit inspired a lot of singing around Jesus' birth. Zechariah hears he is going to be a daddy, and sings. Mary hears she is going to be a mommy, and sings. Elizabeth sings. Simeon sings. Even the angels sing. They sang as prophets. All through the Old Testament, the way a prophet became a prophet was that the spirit of the Lord came upon them and gave them words to say or to sing. Elizabeth took a turn at prophet. When she was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud voice, "Nay, blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb." Then it was her husband, Zechariah's turn. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesized saying, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for He has visited and redeemed His people." And what of Mary, when she echoed the prophets, who spoke of the day when God would turn this unjust and uncaring world upside down? Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord. He has shown strength with His arm. He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts." God is coming as Savior. This is good news for those who know they need a Savior, who know they have broken off from God, and broken off from others, broken in spirit, and need help, and need healing, and need God. To such as these, God is Savior and good news, but to those who are proud in the imagination of their hearts, which think they need nothing and no one, who worship self-alone, these God will scatter. Mary continues, "And He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exhausted those of low degree, and He will fill the hungry with good things, and the rich He will send away, empty." This is Mary, magnifying the Lord. We call it the Magnificat. Back before India won its independence from British rule, Bishop William Temple of the Anglican Church warned his missionaries in India not to ever, ever read this Magnificat in public. He feared that it would be so inflammatory that it might start a revolution. Yes, Mary was a prophet of God's coming justice and change, of God's salvation. To those who clung to God's grace, it meant eternal life, and to those who clung to things of this world and to themselves, only scattering and sent empty away. The Shalom, in Hebrew, the peace, the Enoch, the healing, the wholeness, the intimate relationship between God and His people was going to be re-established, and those who trust only in themselves and only in their own merits or only in their own wealth, or cut off from caring or connection to God or others, and they have their reward, they are sent away empty when the Savior comes. They who think they need nothing from God, it seems, get nothing from God, but a heart softened by God's spirit knows that things are wrong, that all have sinned and fallen away, fallen in many different ways, but from God and away from each other. We cry peace, peace, but there is no peace. This world has no peace, no shalom, and there are so many without enough, and there are so many without anyone who cares, but there are many others who build bigger barns for their bumper crops, and never think of sharing, sharing what they think is their salvation, but is nothing but dust and rust. This world has no Shalom. This world is grabbing and judging and tearing and biting and fighting and blaming and walking away and forgetting the suffering of others. This is not what God had in mind from the beginning. The Savior who is coming will begin to set things aright, to put things into perspective, to teach what matters most, and what cannot save. These are hard words, and joyful words, depending upon who you are and how you hear

them. Those who are full of themselves have had their reward. Those who thought all their gift was for them and them only, and did not hear the cry of the needy, will be brought down, will be scattered, will be sent away empty, but those who had almost given up hope or had hope only in God, only God and no one else to hope in, they, yes, they will be raised up, and filled with good things, be given peace and shalom. All this through the child that Mary bore, the Savior. It is true that in the Old Testament the prophets gave God's Word only when the spirit was upon them, and Jesus Himself said at His first synagogue sermon, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news to the poor." By the spirit, the prophets spoke. When the spirit, I need you to listen for just a second, when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary, when she conceived, when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary, more than mere words came from her mouth, the very word of God came forth from her womb in flesh. This is the message in all its earthiness, in all its physicality, in all its scandal and all the power of Jesus' birth. By the Holy Spirit, Mary did more than speak words, she gave birth to God's word made flesh. The word was made flesh through Mary. Jesus, who lived out and spoke and embodied and died and was resurrected in God's will and as God's word incarnate. The good news to those who know they need it, the good news to those who know that self and things of dust and rust cannot save nor ever make for peace. The good news is that God's word acting, living, breathing out His spirit on all people saved in Jesus Christ. We are not helpless. We are not hopeless. We are not alone. God has come to us. We are left alone in a meaningless, brutish, biting, fighting world with walls and wealth and security and bigger barns. There is more! We can know the love of God, who forgives and loves us, and then enables us to forgive and love ourselves and care more for others than for things. Change! Growth! Recreation happens when God breathes on us, in us, overshadows us, plants His seed in our heart then we can see God's light, and in our eyes we can see with God's light that we are all one creation, and that we all sin, and that we all die, but yet beyond these facts, we all have hope through Jesus Christ. Mary's proclamation is uncompromisingly clear. Christmas means the scattering of all idolatry. It means unrelenting resistance to every force or institution or thing that presumes to play the role of God. From the revelation of God, behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore for the former things have passed away. Amen.

Meditation on Simeon

I'd like to share with you now a little known story, a little spoken-of story about Simeon from the Gospel of Luke, the second chapter, verses 25-35.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took Him in his arms, and praised God, saying, "Master, now You are

dismissing your servant in peace according to your word for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all people, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel. The child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him, and then Simeon blessed them, and said to his mother, Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed and the sword will pierce your own soul as well."

John Donne wrote, "I shall not live until I see God, and when I have seen Him, I shall never die." We so often hear about an older person who was gravely ill, just hanging on, waiting until some beloved someone arrived, and then, and then they go. In a way, that is Simeon's story. Almost forgotten in the Gospel that, at eight days old, they took baby Jesus to the temple for the Jewish ritual of circumcision. It was a sign of the Covenant. Here's where the story gets interesting. While they were there fulfilling the ordinary Jewish law and the ritual, something very unusual happened. God had inspired a man named Simeon to meet them there, and in three short verses, the Holy Spirit is mentioned three times. Now, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. He was righteous and devout looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah, and so inspired by the Spirit, he came to the temple. Very unusual. Even more unusual is that Simeon is almost left out of the Christmas story. Some regular Sunday church members don't even know his name. Please do remember just how dark the world was back then. In a military occupied Jerusalem, Jews like Simeon were under constant threat of violence. They were mocked for their beliefs. There was mistrust. There was intrigue. There was sell out among the Jewish population, who became tax collectors for the local occupying army. Nobody knew whom to trust. They thought it might all blow up any minute. This is the world that Simeon waited in to see God's Messiah before he died. It's 2000 plus years later. How long will it take before we see? We cannot and can never bring peace, not with our best intentions, not with our most powerful armies or our cleverest politicians. We as a people of humanity are fatally flawed. Fallen from the image of God, we do cry peace, but there is no peace. We cry God save my people, my nation, my children, and so does the other side, and so does the other side. Do not miss that. Inspired, Simeon called Jesus more than the consolation of Israel. He said, "My eyes have seen my salvation prepared in the presence of all people, a light of revelation for the Gentiles and for the glory of our people Israel. He is unequivocally a Savior for all people." Israel knew long ago that nothing less than God's direct intervention would do. The wisdom of the wise will not save us. The cleverness of the clever will not save us. Simeon stands in for all Israel, waiting in hope, and the life and hope of non-Jews as well for the Messiah, the Savior. Hear in your hearts Simeon's words, not just the words of a sentimental old man, dying, but inspired by God's spirit, he says, "Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, a light for the revelation of the Gentiles and the glory to thy people Israel.

And so Mary, she was afraid when Gabriel showed up and told her she would bear child of the Holy Spirit, and she pondered these angelic words in her heart. We look backward and give her too much credit. Of course, she was faithful and righteous, but she could only know what she knew, and she couldn't understand all these things happening to her or understand this man Simeon in front of her, grabbing her child and saying, "I can die now. I have seen God's salvation." We see the whole story in our minds, and we say, well, okay, we understand that, but Mary and Joseph saw an old man grasping their eight-day-old son, and prophesying this child was sent for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and a sign that is spoken against, and will reveal the inner thoughts of many hearts, and he looked at Mary and said, and a sword will pierce your own soul as well. Try, just try, to put yourself in Mary and Joseph's place, and don't skip to verse 33, "And his mother and father marveled at what was said to them." Give them permission to be puzzled and afraid and to ponder these things. Faith and trust in God often demand holding onto God when things don't seem to make sense and the whole world breaks loose around us. God came as Savior to a nation weary of waiting, to a nation weary of war, to a people, who from time to time tried on other exotic faiths because theirs didn't seem to be working anymore. Now, God is still with us, and Jesus promised the presence of His spirit with us until the very end, but sometimes, it looks like the end. Who knows! Who knows how and when God will act. Mary and Joseph, we know, were surprised in this moment.

The artist, Giotto, painted this encounter in his painting, "Presentation in the Temple." According to art critic, John Dixon, it's one of the few genuinely witty paintings in great art. Simeon, in the picture, holds the baby Jesus, and his lips are moving beneath his gray beard, grayer than mine, I hope, carefully reciting his often rehearsed lines, Nunc Dimittis, Now, let thy servant depart in peace. Giotto knows his Simeon. He also knows babies because in the picture, the infant Jesus is not resting contentedly in his arms. He's responding the way any baby would to an eccentric old stranger grabbing him. His dark eyes are narrowed and fixed and frozen in alarm on Simeon, and he is reaching desperately in the painting for his mother. Every muscle arched away from the strange old man. The artist also knows the deep truth of this moment, for in the picture, if you have seen it, we observe that the child is suspended above the temple altar. This very human baby is from the beginning the eternal sacrifice for the redemption of mankind. With Simeon we rejoice and wait.

Dick Van Dyke tells the story of a little boy, who said that he figured out where babies get their belly buttons. You see, the little boy said, when God finishes making babies, he lines them up in a row, and he says, "You're done. You're done. You're done." That's what he figured out.

With Simeon, we rejoice and we wait, but the point for us today is God is not done yet. We are not done in our faith yet. Now, we wait, but as we wait, we work out our faith as we wait, wondering what God will do next. Who knows how or whom God will act through next? Faithfully wait and anticipate God acting through even such as you and me. Amen.