

THE NUNC DIMITTIS

LUKE 2:25-32

If you're not careful, you can miss the deepest meaning of Christmas. A man attended a worship service during the Christmas season and the speaker that day explained how the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection were the fulfillment of the meaning of Christmas. After the service, this man said to the speaker, "When I come to church at Christmas, I don't want to hear about the death of Christ. I want to hear something glad and cheerful." It's easy to so romanticize the Christmas story that it becomes little more than a kind of pleasant fable featuring a big star, exotic wise men bearing gifts and scruffy shepherds mingling with angels. Until you understand Good Friday and Easter Sunday, you don't fully understand Christmas Day. Unless you appreciate fully the cross of Christ, you will never understand the cradle of Christ.

Simeon understood. Who's Simeon? He's the man who gave a prophetic announcement recorded for us in Luke 2 that became a poem. It probably was set to music and sung by the first Christians some 2000 years ago. It's one of four poems we find in Luke 1 and 2 that we're calling "The Canticles of the Christ Child" this Advent season. Over the years, these four poems were given Latin names. We've considered the *Magnificat* – Latin for "magnify" which was composed by Mary, Jesus' mother; the *Benedictus* – Latin for "blessed" which was put together by Zechariah, John the Baptist's father; the *Gloria in Excelsis* – meaning "glory in the highest" which was sung by the angels to the shepherds on that first Christmas night. Today, I want to consider with you the *Nunc Dimittis* which is a Latin phrase meaning "now let thou depart." Let's set the stage and then hear what Simeon said.

Eight days after Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary brought him to the temple in Jerusalem for the rite of circumcision. Simeon is only mentioned here in the Bible. He's described as a godly man filled with the Holy Spirit. Some scholars believe he was a priest. He was probably an elderly man. It seems that God had revealed to Simeon at some point in his life that Simeon wouldn't die until he had actually seen with his own two eyes the person through whom God would offer salvation to the entire world. When Simeon saw the baby Jesus, the Holy Spirit filled him with the understanding of what this Person would mean to the world. Now, the *Nunc Dimittis* isn't a long poem by any means. But its words reveal a great deal. I see at least three important truths in Simeon's words.

THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION IS VERY WIDE.

There is one clear, consistent message from the front of the Bible to the back of it. Human beings need help! Educating people is great. Offering words and acts of encouragement to people is wonderful. Building healthy self-esteem in folk has real value. But, after all is said and done, you still need massive amounts of help that only God can provide. Odd as it may seem, human beings make a habit of trying almost everything and everyone else before turning to God for assistance. The Bible paints a stark but realistic picture: Without God, you are lost. Without God, you have no hope. Without God, your destiny is despair. But the Bible offers this assessment of the human

condition for one gracious reason – to get you and me pointed towards the only One who can save and help us. That’s God Himself.

Observe again what Simeon said to God as he looked down on the baby Jesus that day. “I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!” (Luke 2:30-32 NLT) Simeon knew that through Jesus, God would provide salvation not to just Jewish folk but to everyone around the world as well. Yes, the nation of Israel could take justifiable pride in the fact that God’s salvation had come through their ethnic stock. Now, this is wonderful news for everyone here... and everyone not here, too! The good news of Jesus is just as true for the Afghan as for the American... for the Bulgarian as for the Brazilian... for the Canadian as for the Chinese. The message of salvation is offered to every kind of person from every country, every nation, every culture, and every background that exists. It’s for rich people and poor people, middle class folk and lower class ones, too. It’s for educated people and illiterate folk. It’s for men, women, boys and girls. No one is excluded. No one is left out.

Now, I’m not saying everyone will respond to God’s gracious offer or that everyone will be in heaven for eternity. In fact, the Bible makes it quite clear that many will never come to Jesus for salvation. Nevertheless, the offer is made and the message is proclaimed to every kind of person who has lived, is living or will ever live. Jesus told his first followers to go and do something. “God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 28:19 MSG) That applies to you and me just as much.

How many of you are glad today that the message of salvation is very wide? Just think about it! There’s no person who is beyond God’s ability to love and save by His grace. Not even you! There’s no one who’s just too far gone. And by implication, there’s no place where the good news is inappropriate. In fact, the message about Jesus needs to be proclaimed to every person, to every family, to every culture, and in every nation. A follower of Jesus who had grasped this truth was back in the stable area at a horse track. He began sharing with one of the jockeys concerning his need for salvation through Jesus. The jockey objected. “This is no place to talk about religion. So that’s the end of that!” The Christian simply replied, “Oh, no, that’s not the end of that at all; it’s only the beginning. Christianity began in a stable. Jesus was born in a stable, and you can be born again in one.”

Can I ask you do something for me just now? Close your eyes for just a moment. Now I want you to picture in your mind just three people you know who have not received salvation from Jesus yet. It might be a relative, a neighbor or a friend. Can you see those three people? OK, now open your eyes and let me ask you a few questions. Are you praying for those people regularly? Are you taking any initiative to build a relationship with them? Could you invite just one of them to the Christmas Eve service tomorrow night or a worship service some Sunday morning? I don’t want to lay a guilt trip on you. I simply want to remind you that God’s message is just as wide as His love.

He uses ordinary people – folks just like you and me – to communicate that message to those who have not received it yet. Lost people matter to God. Jesus came as a baby ultimately for lost people. Your mission and mine revolves around reaching lost people for Jesus in some way, shape or form. The message of salvation is very wide. But just because it's wide and is offered to everyone, don't think that it's somehow shallow and superficial. Here's a second truth found in the *Nunc Dimittis*:

THE MEANING OF SALVATION IS VERY DEEP.

Simeon's song is big on hope. You need hope – real, solid genuine hope that makes life livable and wonderful. What do you hope for? What do you long for? What do you dream about either doing or having? If we were honest with each other today, I think we'd have to admit that many of our hopes are pretty shallow. Most of the time your hopes and mine revolve around getting the right job, buying the right house or car, building a healthy retirement portfolio of investments or maybe finding the right spouse. You hope for smooth sailing in life: great health for you and your family, relatively few problems, a comfortable lifestyle.

When I compare the stuff I hope for with what Simeon hoped for, I feel ashamed frankly. We're told there in v. 25 that Simeon was waiting for something called "the consolation of Israel." What's that? Simeon was waiting for God to break into the world. Simeon longed to see God act and just be a part of it. Simeon ached to see the Kingdom of God actually come with power. That's one reason I believe Simeon was an old man. Have you noticed that the older you get, the less the things of this world excite you, motivate you and inspire you? So much of what is offered to us we turn away from with that "been there; done that" feeling. Simeon wasn't cynical or sour about life. It's just that having experienced much of what life had to offer, he found himself dissatisfied with anything less and anyone else but God! Is God the One you long for, hope for and wait for? Is knowing God and loving Him more the greatest hope of your life? Why's that important? Because what you hope for tells a lot about who you are.

So what's so great about hope that's built on God and in God? One, it enables you to persevere in life. You can still be this flawed, broken person and not give up in despair. Why? Because your hope is in God not in yourself. You can keep on living joyfully even in the face of great sorrow, tragedy and heartache. Why? Because whatever you've endured isn't the end of your story. God is the end of your story and He's endless! Two, it enables you to live authentically. Your hope is built on the One who died and rose again for you and now indwells you through the Holy Spirit. The Bible even puts it like this: "...Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Colossians 1:27 NIV). Because of Jesus, your past is forgiven and cleansed. Because of Jesus, your present is full of His love and grace. Because of Jesus, your future is both secure and beyond your wildest imagination. Simeon waited many, many years to see what he saw that day in the temple in Jerusalem. What sustained him and kept him going? At the end of the day, it was hope – hope built on God and in God.

Christmas hasn't changed the stark reality that life is hard and unfair. All the Christmas parties, sparkly tinsel and department store carols can't hide the truth. Little kids die of cancer. People lose their jobs. Loved one become chronically ill. Some of them die. Marriages disintegrate. Innocent people are locked away in seemingly endless cycles of hunger, poverty and homelessness. Probably everyone here has already experienced life's hardness and unfairness. If you haven't yet, you will! And when those moments come – when you run right into life's hard, unfair experiences face first – it will test and reveal the content of your hope. When your hope is built on God and in God, you still hurt and hurt bad. But through it all, you also know that God is going to have the last word. You don't know how or when or what God will do. But you know God will win in the end. Simeon knew that when he looked into the face of the baby Jesus. So can you and I.

Christmas Eve 1971. A prison cell in Hanoi, North Vietnam. A single light bulb reveals a group of two dozen skinny, wretched looking men. Once, these same men had been superbly fit Air Force, Navy and Marine pilots and navigators. But now several shivered with fever. Some were too sick to stand. Others were permanently stooped from torture. Others limped on makeshift crutches. There had been Christmas Eve services in previous years – staged and orchestrated for propaganda purposes. This service, however, was the first time American POWs in the Vietnam War had been allowed to have one on their own. The men were understandably nervous. At other worship services, guards had burst in, beat the men involved and then locked them away in solitary confinement for 11 months in cells measuring 3 x 5 feet. That Christmas Eve service back in 1971 was simple enough: the Lord's Prayer... singing a few Christmas carols... hearing the Christmas story read from the Bible. Some of the soldiers even managed to make some crude gifts. Other exchanged IOUs on bits of paper. But it was when they started singing "Silent Night" that the tears began to roll down their unshaven, unwashed faces. Not war, not torture, not imprisonment, and not even uncertainty about the future could dim their hope in the One who was born on a silent, holy night some 2000 years ago. The message of salvation is very wide. The meaning of salvation is very deep. Here's a final thought suggested by the *Nunc Dimittis*

THE MEANS OF SALVATION IS VERY NARROW

I want you to notice carefully what Simeon said as he held the baby Jesus that day in the temple. "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people." (Luke 2:30-31 NIV) He doesn't say, "For my eyes has seen one of the many ways people can receive salvation" or "For my eyes have seen one of several possible ways to find God." No, Simeon implies here what we know the Bible teaches full well: the means of salvation is very narrow. In other words, the way you get saved is as narrow as Jesus. Jesus Himself said it, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (John 14:6 NLT) Those who first became followers of Jesus did not expand that narrowness. The apostle Peter said, "Salvation comes no other way; no other name has been or will be given to us by which we can be saved, only this one." (Acts 4:12 MSG) He meant Jesus and Jesus alone.

We live in a culture that wants to make the means of salvation very broad. We have confused the blessing of religious tolerance with the lie that all religions are equally valid. We hear statements like, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something... As long as you're a good person and have faith, you'll probably go to heaven... All religions believe pretty much the same thing." Most people in our culture – even members of churches - nod in agreement. Yes, we should be thankful that we live in a country where people can practice whatever form of faith – or lack of faith – they choose. But that doesn't mean that every faith system is true. Jesus made it very clear. You can't find God by following Buddha. You can't find God by following Mohammed. You can't find God by following Krishna. You can't find God by realizing your own essential divinity. You can't find God by being a good, moral person. You can't find God by being sincere and trying hard. You find God exclusively by following Jesus and Jesus alone.

Simeon had it right all along. He says to God, "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people." (Luke 2:30-31 NIV) Jesus alone is your salvation and mine. He was placed in a cradle so that He could grow up and die on a cross. And when He rose from the dead, He purchased a place in heaven for every person who will put his or her trust in Him alone. All that God is – all that He offers you in salvation – comes through one very narrow means – Jesus the Christ.

The year was 1937. For the first time, John Griffith brought his eight year old son, Greg, to work with him to see what Daddy did. The boy was wide-eyed with excitement to see how the huge bridge over the Mississippi River went up and down when ordered to do so by his mighty father. At noon, John Griffith put the bridge up so that the big boats on the river could go through unimpeded. No trains were due for a while. He and Greg walked out to an observation deck, sat down and began enjoying a sack lunch together. John told stories while his son listened with rapt attention.

Then, suddenly, a train whistle sounded. John Griffith looked at his watch. It was time for the 107, the Memphis Express with some 400 passengers, to rush across the bridge in just a few minutes. He would have to hurry but he had time. He told Greg to stay where he was. Then he hurried back to the control room, went in, and put his hand on the huge lever that controlled the bridge. He looked up and down the river to see if any boats were coming and then to see if any where directly under the bridge. It was then that he saw something that made his blood freeze. His son had tried to follow him to the control room, but had somehow fallen into the huge box that housed the monstrous gears that operated the massive drawbridge. The boy's left leg was caught between the two main gears. John Griffith knew that if he pushed that lever down, his son would be crushed by the gears. Panic filled his heart as tears filled his eyes. What could he do?

He saw a rope there in the control room. Was there time to use it to rescue his son? But he knew immediately that he would never make it. The train whistle sounded again. Now he could hear the clicking of the train wheels on the track. There were 400 people on the Memphis Express. But Greg was his son – his only son. John Griffith knew what he had to do in that awful moment. He buried his head in his hands and pushed that

gear forward and down. The great bridge slowly lowered into place just as the train roared across. John Griffith lifted his tear smeared face and looked straight into the windows of that train as it flashed by. He saw men reading the paper, a conductor in uniform looking at his pocket watch, ladies sipping tea, and children pushing long spoons through scoops of ice cream. Nobody looked into the control room. Nobody saw John Griffith's tears. And nobody looked into that great gear box below the bridge. Filled with agony, John beat against the window of the control room, "What's wrong with you people? Don't you care? I gave my son; I sacrificed my son for you!" But nobody looked. Nobody heard. Nobody knew. And the train disappeared across the river.

I wonder if people who believe that there are many ways to heaven realize how much they insult and offend God by the sheer idiocy of that belief. Do you honestly think that if there had been any other way for you and me to have an eternal relationship with God that He would have allowed His one and only Son to be crushed to death for your sin and mine? "Rick, that was an ugly story to hear two days before Christmas." Was it? The Triune God saw our predicament. He could have let us all just go to hell which we deserved. Instead, He chose to take human form in His Son and to be crushed by the grinding gears of our sin, our hurts and our rebellion. And because He died and rose again, you can be forgiven, restored and assured of an eternal home. My friend, you will never understand the cradle if you do not see - behind it, above it, beneath it and around it - the cross. No one was saved, is being saved or ever will be saved by anyone other than Jesus Christ. The message of salvation is very wide. The meaning of salvation is very deep. The means of salvation is very narrow.