

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
12/28/2014, The First Sunday of Christmas  
Luke 2:22-40  
The Old Man's Song of Faith

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A fascinating feature of the Christmas story for me is how quickly it cuts to the chase and speaks of death. It is as if the Bible wants to say, "Death, begone!" Faith leaps into the maelstrom of human misery, stares down death, shouts with triumph, "Unto us is born a Savior!" and with perfect peace says,

<sup>29</sup>Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
according to thy word;  
<sup>30</sup>for mine eyes have seen thy salvation...

This is my text — the opening words of the *Nunc Dimittis*. These are the words of that good old man Simeon, from this morning's Gospel Lesson.

It is no naïve faith, this Christmas faith of the Bible. It openly acknowledges the reality of death, but then moves on to the old man's peacefulness in face of death. There are two sides, then, to this sermon: (1) The Christmas story's acknowledgement of death. And (2) The Christmas story's confidence in face of death.

First, the willingness of Christmas to face up to death.

## WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

Let me begin with a Christmas carol — one we sang just a couple days ago, on Christmas morning. I speak of the carol "What Child Is This?" (LBW 40) Here we were, gathered together in our lovely church, with our Christmas tree glowing, with our pew torches burning, with our red ribbons flowing from the balcony, with harp and Jim Miller's mellow cornetto and the beautiful voices of the quartet leading us in that haunting melody called "Greensleeves." You would think that the poet would write only happy words to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. But no. The poet — William C. Dix (1837-1898) — proves himself true to the complete story of Jesus, and so it is that right in the midst of that beautiful hymn, we find these hard words — true words, but hard words:

Nails, spear shall pierce him through,  
the cross be borne for me, for you;  
hail, hail the Word made flesh,  
the babe, the son of Mary!

No one who has a baby wants to contemplate that someday that baby could grow up and die on a cross. Surely Mary and Joseph did not want to think that someday the wood of the manger would be exchanged for the wood of a cruel cross. Yet, that too is part of this Christmas story. This Child whose life begins in Bethlehem will end up in Jerusalem not far away, and he will end up on a cross.

Christmas piety is happy at the birth of the Christ Child. But Christmas piety also knows that this Child shall suffer for you, for me.

## **THE SLAUGHTER OF THE INNOCENTS**

The Bible plunges from the joy of the Christmas angels singing their Gloria and speaking of “peace on earth” to the horrible story called “The Slaughter of the Innocents.” You recall the heartrending story, I am sure. The wise men visit that cruel old king, Herod the Great, thereby tipping him off that a new King has been born. In a mad attempt to kill this newborn King, Herod sends his soldiers to Bethlehem with orders to kill every boy child two years old and younger. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus flee to Egypt, but the little boys of Bethlehem do not, and they are murdered. So quickly the story changes from the beauty of Christmas to the sorrow of death and injustice.

In this the Bible shows itself true to the world as it is, to this very day. Not true to the way the world *ought* to be, not true to the world as it *will* be when Jesus comes again with power and beauty, but true to the world as it is for now — this veil of tears.

I hesitate to go into this, it troubles me so much to think about the abuse of children. Yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal* had an article about child soldiers somewhere in the Middle East being instructed in how to behead a person. Boys as young as eight were taught beheading, practicing on frightened captured soldiers.<sup>1</sup>

I, for one, would like to escape such news. I much prefer reading about football and about basketball and all kinds of things. But my point is simply this: The Christmas story *does not* escape the realities of life. The story of the Nativity of Our Lord is soon followed by the story of the Slaughter of the Innocents, and within the short lifespan of Jesus it is driven to speak of the old rugged cross.

So, that is the first part of my sermon. The Christmas story is not naïve. It acknowledges that Jesus was born into a hard, hard world.

## **SIMEON**

But now we come to the dear old man, Simeon. He gives us encouragement. He has lived a good life so far. The Bible praises him with words any of us would be proud to hear:

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<sup>1</sup> “It was like learning to chop an onion,” Jomah said. “You grab him by the forehead and then slowly slice across the neck.” [http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-child-soldiers-who-escaped-islamic-state-1419628277?mod=WSJ\\_hpp\\_MIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsTop](http://www.wsj.com/articles/the-child-soldiers-who-escaped-islamic-state-1419628277?mod=WSJ_hpp_MIDDLENexttoWhatsNewsTop)

<sup>25</sup>Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. (Luke 2:25, RSV)

Later in this liturgy, we are going to sing Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis*. It is his farewell song to this world. Few of us want to die. Life is sweet. Every cell in our body longs for breath, and we want to go on. We have loved ones to care for, joys still to experience, and it is *frightening* to have to face death. But old Simeon has beheld a sight that calms even the fear of death. Mary and Joseph have brought their baby into the Temple, and Simeon has taken the baby in his arms. I imagine that there was something about this old man that reassured Mary that she could entrust her little one into the arms of this old man. Trustworthy! That's how Simeon must have seemed to Mary. Simeon takes the child into his arms and breaks forth into a song of faith — a faith so strong that even death no longer holds its terrors. And so we come to this morning's great text:

<sup>27</sup>And inspired by the Spirit he came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, <sup>28</sup>he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

<sup>29</sup>“Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace,  
according to thy word;  
<sup>30</sup>for mine eyes have seen thy salvation...”

What is it you see, old man?  
I see Salvation!

Are you sure? It appears that you are looking at a baby.  
Yes, I am looking at a baby. But in looking at *this* baby, I am looking at salvation. Let this world huff and puff and going on breaking human hearts. Let this world do its worst. All of that misery will be overcome, for “mine eyes have seen thy salvation...”

## **MARTIN LUTHER**

In one of Martin Luther's Christmas sermons, Luther delights in death being overcome by Christmas. Luther loved that word “Savior.” Listen to his great preaching about that:

This is our theology... Mary bore the child, took it to her breast and nursed it, and the Father in heaven has his Son, lying in the manger and the

mother's lap...And the angel desired that we should see nothing but the child which is born... For if I receive even the costliest and best in the world, it still does not have the name of Savior... In my sin, my death, I must take leave of all created things. No, sun, moon, stars, all creatures, physicians, emperors, kings, wise men and potentates cannot help me. When I die I shall see nothing but black darkness, and yet that light, "To you is born this day the Savior" [Luke 2:11], remains in my eyes and fills all heaven and earth. The Savior will help me when all have forsaken me. And when the heavens and the stars and all creatures stare at me with horrible mien, I see nothing in heaven and earth but this child. (Luther's Works, Vol. 51, Sermons, "On Christmas Day, 1530), pages 213-14)

Earlier this week, in fact in the early afternoon before our Christmas Eve liturgy, I visited in a nursing home and tried to tell one of our frail elderly members about this passage in Luther. This dear old lady, God bless her, really got into. She laughed, she carried onwards:

When I die, no President can save me, (she chuckled). No Senator will do me any good. No physician will be able to help. No medicine will avail — take them all away. No attorney, no rich man, no nation will help me. But this Child will help me!

There is no fear in love, says the Bible:

There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear... (1 John 4:18, KJV)

Christmas means that we do not need to walk through the valley of the shadow of death alone. Christmas means that we are loved with a *perfect* love, the kind of love that cast out fear in old Simeon. For unto us is born a Savior, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.