

**“Fighting the Good Fight with Jesus At Our Side”
Luke 2:22-40**

**St. Andrew Lutheran Church, Poplar Bluff
First Sunday Of Christmas**

This morning’s gospel text is very comforting – for anyone who needs consolation, as Israel did at the time of Jesus’ birth. Those who think life is great – assuming such people actually exist anymore – will not appreciate the plot twist in the middle. The folks who heard Jesus’ famous Isaiah-inspired sermon many years later might well fit into this category.

When you are living as Jews in Roman occupied Palestine, you naturally take great comfort in fulfilling the obligations of the law of Moses. You might even do so in the most central, public place your religious community recognizes, as if to celebrate that the occupiers cannot prevent you from exercising your religious identity. It must have felt good to have prominent figures within their own religious community bless their child instead of the Emperor hijacking the moment for his own purposes.

For some today, a similar good feeling comes from seeing the multitude of Trump campaign election lawsuits being summarily dismissed, often by judges his administration appointed. Of course, there are others who weary of having to hear about these attempts to reverse the result of the election. They ask, “How much longer must we put up with this before life in these United States can get back to

normal?” I have no idea if there were Jews in Jesus’ time who felt anxiety about the Temple in Jerusalem risking Rome’s ire, but I would not be surprised if there were.

One thing that is painfully obvious – then and now – is that a few individuals keeping the law is not enough to bring about what the angels proclaimed to the shepherds: “glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those he favors!” Jews were still enslaved to Rome in many ways even after Mary and Joseph and their child returned home. The American landscape does not magically transform just by replacing Donald Trump with Joseph Biden on January 20, 2021. Most people are at least somewhat aware of that. This country is still in the grips of a pandemic. My sense is that the vaccine is the beginning of a long road to recovery, not a magic silver bullet that makes it go away instantly. Police brutality is an issue that will be with us as ever in 2021. Without some extraordinary action, many people face eviction in January because their jobs were eliminated by COVID-19 and they cannot pay their rent. You can think of lots of other political and social conflicts that will be with us for a long time. Peace in our world is not achieved simply by personal, private, law-keeping. When we see injustice in the world around us, we cannot bring about true peace simply by playing it straight and “not getting involved.”

This point is reinforced by Simeon during a joyful moment for Mary and Joseph: “This child of yours is going to grow up to be a divider in the interest of justice and freedom for all. You yourself sang about how he will bring down the powerful from their thrones and lift up the lowly and fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty.” In our language, Simeon basically implies that he will disturb the privileged, on behalf of the downtrodden, thereby revealing their true inner thoughts.

Powerful and oppressive people may or may not be warm-hearted enough to be moved by such a message. But most of us are neither powerful nor oppressive. Much more likely are we to be stung by the accusation that we benefit from the actions of the powerful and oppressive, especially when we had no active part in those actions. Rather, we tend to be unaware that the scales are being tipped in our favor. As we naturally defend ourselves as individuals for having blindly supported the status quo, we are forced to confront our own inner thoughts as they are revealed in the conflict.

Even more worrisome is Simeon’s declaration that this child whose birth we just celebrated on Friday is destined for the falling and rising of many. Not only will he bring conflict, but he will bring upheaval. He will turn our world upside down. Opposing this sign means opposing one’s own redemption. Those who are not on board with Isaiah’s vision of the kingdom (which Jesus will preach about in

his home synagogue) will be stuck trying to make it by following the edicts of law and demonstrating their own righteousness by their own will and strength.

Simeon, in effect, says “Good luck with that.”

This does not sound like good news at all, does it? Did we not just respond to this lesson with “Thanks be to God?” The lectionary does this to us from time to time because Jesus does this to us from time to time. Maybe it is prudent to examine more closely this message before we just automatically jump to the conclusion that it is good news for us.

Notice how Jesus – God’s own son – is born into this legalistic world we live in as one of us, subject to the same pressures and living conditions we are. Well, actually his standard of living might have been worse than ours, which may explain why he had such affinity and love for the poor and oppressed. He is just a child, so he has no say in the matter, but nevertheless here is God being blessed by one of God’s own servants, according to the laws that God gave to Moses. The child is a participant in a legalistic practice, which Simeon transforms into a message about the salvation of Israel that will also enlighten the gentiles. In the great prophetic tradition of Israel, God’s salvation will ultimately extend to all nations.

He is destined for the falling and rising of many, says Simeon. His adult life and ministry will demonstrate this dual path visibly. He will be chased to a cliff for assigning Isaiah's vision to himself. He will even acknowledge the divisive agenda Simeon foretold, admitting to the dividing of families and communities over his message. Curiously, he will in the same breath associate this with his own baptism of fire. We cannot help noticing that eventually his divisive message will catch up with him and strike him down so that he is the one doing the falling: falling to his death on a cross, falling to the realm of the dead in his burial, falling to meet any who have fallen because of his divisive message.

But then comes the rising, beginning with his own. Talk about the height of "getting involved." His rising did not simply reverse his own death, his own falling. He defeated death for everyone else, too. He suffered the ultimate injustice and rose above it, not as an example we can use to tell the poor to suck it up, but rather as a singular event in which we all get to vicariously participate for our own benefit. He sides with the downtrodden, the impoverished, the oppressed, the brutalized, the hungry, the homeless, etc. But in the heavenly realm, he also sides with the wicked and the guilty, including those whose only guilt is accepting the status quo. He sides with us by bearing our guilt, relieving us of its oppressive burden in his sacrifice on the cross. He divides us to conquer sin, not to conquer the well-off.

It takes no less a power than the Holy Spirit to help us see the good news in all this. That same spirit led Simeon and Anna to come to this celebration with their words of praise and exaltation. For both of them it must have been quite cathartic. Simeon apparently was holding on to this mortal coil with all his might for this moment, and he made sure it was worth the wait, giving us a proclamation which we have for many years used as our post-communion canticle. Note, it was not the law that motivated him to be there, it was the Holy Spirit. Because of that influence, they both believed that this child was the redemption of Jerusalem. Come to think of it, Mary herself had sung her song not in the future tense as I implied earlier, but in the present tense: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.” As if it has already happened or is a fait accompli. Only the Holy Spirit could lead her to make such a pronouncement. Furthermore, this redemption was not meant to be merely a spiritual one, but a full redemption of body and soul. This world is not fully redeemed until there is no poverty, no hunger, no racism, no more of a lot of things that we may be numb to. And we are not fully risen until the Holy Spirit leads us to “get involved” according to our own talents and gifts. We do not have to leave our faith in Jesus behind to get involved. We may have to get creative in how we express that faith, but Jesus eagerly accompanies us as we enter the fray.

The good news is that the ultimate responsibility for such comprehensive redemption is not on us. It is on Jesus and his Holy Spirit. We are responsible for listening to the Holy Spirit and doing our part as best we can. That does not make it a walk in the park by any means, but Jesus is the one who bears what the world would call “our failures.” We can “get involved” without harming our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. God did not demand that we end hunger and poverty; he demanded through the prophet Micah that we “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with the Lord.” He sends his Holy Spirit to strengthen us for just such a journey.

Another thing that is not going away – I believe – in 2021 is organized protesting: of police brutality, for universal healthcare, for a continued moratorium on evictions, for universal basic income – just to name a few. There are signs that our President-Elect welcomes such challenges to his otherwise centrist agenda. All these positions are certainly debatable, and I am not up here shilling for any of them, but there is a hint of recognition that doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with the Lord is a lifestyle, not a temporary measure, no matter who is in leadership over the nation. Some who voted for Joe Biden have indicated that they will not simply declare victory and go back to supporting the status quo. Whether or not Jesus would approve of their individual causes, I believe he would celebrate their level of commitment. I suspect the prophet Isaiah

would approve as well: “For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.”

But we can join the fight with Mary’s faith, trusting that such vindication is just a matter of time, that it cannot be prevented, only delayed. We can remember Simeon’s use of the present tense as we attempt to fight the good fight: “My eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of your people Israel.” Amen.