



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

Nunc Dimittis: A Wonderful Promise and Sad.

Luke 2:25-35

^{ESV} **Luke 2:25**...Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ²⁹ "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." ³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that the Holy Spirit come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts...to come and take the written word and as its true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

There are two different stories in the Bible regarding the birth of the Lord Jesus and in some respects they could not be more different. The story in Luke takes place or starts really on the night that the Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem. It then moves to Jerusalem and then finally on to Nazareth.

The story in Matthew occurs *after* the Lord Jesus has been born...perhaps even weeks or months after his birth and then moves not to Jerusalem but to Egypt and then only after a period of time on to Nazareth.

The story in Luke involves shepherds who were nearby and were informed by angels of the birth of the Savior in the city of David. They come and worship in simplistic, joyful poverty bringing nothing with them but their impromptu joy and worship at the announcement of God's great salvation manifest to all people everywhere in the birth of this wondrous child.

The story in Matthew involves wise men or Magi coming from the East after having followed a star for perhaps months. They bring treasures from the East, treasures reflecting a carefully thought out liturgically correct response to the birth of the great Messiah King of Israel. They also stir up a measure of political intrigue because on the way to find the child they stop and ask King Herod about the birth of the baby who was to become the King of the Jews.

You know, of course, what that led to.

It led to the death of all the baby boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under. Now, there is no record in secular history of Herod having

ever ordered such a thing but it sure sounds like Herod. He was just the kind of thing he would do. It was just how he thought.

Let me give you one example to prove my point. When Herod knew he was about to die, he had the male head of every prominent family in Israel arrested and imprisoned, and he left an order that they were to be executed the same day he died. This is how he reasoned. He wanted all of Israel to be saddened by his death. But he knew that he was hated and that no one would mourn him when he died. So he thought he force the nation into a state of mourning at the time of his death. He thought he could do that by breaking the heart of the nation by killing its most prominent and beloved patriarchs.

Fortunately, it was an order that was never obeyed.

Still, you can see how the account in Matthew makes perfect sense. It involves a real element on intrigue and terror. The account in Luke does not or at least does not on the surface. And that raises the question, of course, **“Why are the two accounts different? Why do they seem to focus on such completely different things?”**

The answer has to do with the intended audience for each gospel and with the author’s intended purpose for writing what he wrote the way he wrote it. Liberal scholars will tend to say, **“Well obviously neither account is historical because they differ in what they say.”** But we know better. We know God’s Word is inerrant and infallible and true. And we know that differences of perspective and authorial intention cause different emphases.

We know for example that Matthew is the most Jewish of all the gospels. It is directed toward Jews and Jewish believers and it makes the point over and over again that the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of every single promise and prophecy regarding the birth of the Messiah. Because that is true, Matthew loves to focus on details that will remind his readers of Moses and his intention in doing that is to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus over Moses...to demonstrate that Jesus is greater than Moses and ought to be followed even as Moses himself had promised. It is a literary technique called a pastiche.¹

Now I thought I might take just a minute and show you what I mean by similarities.

In Exodus, Pharaoh intends to kill all the Israelite boy babies because of his fear that they may gain too much power. In Matthew, Herod kills all the boy babies in and around Bethlehem because he fears the birth of the King of the Jews.

In Exodus, the great leader Moses leads God's people back to Israel from Egypt. In Matthew, Mary and Joseph return to Israel with the baby Jesus after the death of Herod

In Exodus, Moses and the Israelites were tempted in the wilderness for forty years. In Matthew, the Lord Jesus was tempted in the wilderness for forty days and nights.

In Exodus, Moses went up into the mountain to receive the law while in Matthew Jesus went up onto the mountain to give the law of the kingdom in his Sermon on the Mount. I could go on and on. But you get the point I think.

Matthew emphasized the similarities between Jesus and Moses on purpose. He didn't make things up. He wasn't writing fiction but he was selectively choosing the things he recorded by design.

And Luke does the same thing. Only Luke was writing to Gentiles. Now what is wonderful is that Luke also uses the technique called pastiche. Luke focuses on the fact that Jesus is the great Prophet of God to the world. Luke focuses on the fact that Jesus is the great Redeemer, Prophet King of God. So Luke picks out a different Old Testament story and character to connect with the birth of Jesus.

See if this sounds familiar.

What Old Testament prophet's mother rejoices in a marvelous prayer at the birth of her son? What Old Testament mother takes her child up to the House of God, a house corrupted by materialism and greed, and there presents him to the high priest as an act of worship? What mother leaves her son there at the house of God and returns home without him?

The answer, of course, is Hannah and the prophet is Samuel, the very prophet who would later anoint the great King David to be the King of Israel. You see Luke connects his story of the birth of Jesus not to the story of Moses but to the story of Samuel and David.

I mean think about it. Luke records the story of Mary's song at the announcement of the conception of the Lord Jesus and the song seems very much like Hannah's song and what a song or praise it is.

When Mary and Joseph take Jesus up to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate him to the Lord they meet there a godly old man who had been waiting for a long time for the child to come to him. Of course, Simeon is a much better man than Eli was but that is to be expected because Jesus is a much better prophet than Samuel. And finally later on in the story, Mary and Joseph accidentally leave Jesus behind in Jerusalem and when they go back up to find him he is ministering in the temple just as Samuel who had been left behind had a thousand years before. You see Luke chose the elements he included in his story carefully. He wasn't writing fiction but he was picking and choosing those things that the Spirit led him to choose in order to communicate a certain point...to accomplish something very specific. And his point is that Jesus is the Savior of the World...the great Prophet and King to both Jews and Gentiles alike. But I am rushing ahead.

You see all of that is an introduction to the message this morning but I don't want that fact to be a discouragement to you. I don't expect that the actual exposition of the text will take more than a few minutes but I wanted you to gain some insight into the beauty of this book, into the glory of our great salvation and to infinite splendor of both the incarnation and the mind of our God.²

Now our topic for this morning is *Nunc Dimittis: the Fourth Hymn of Christmas...a hymn with a promise both wonderful and sad.*

In the last twenty centuries or so since the incarnation of our Lord, four different passages from the early chapters or birth narrative of the Gospel of Luke have been recognized for their marvelous beauty and importance and have been incorporated into the church's worship by being fashioned into hymns or

canticles. A Canticle is a fancy word for a piece of Scripture...not a Psalm...but any other piece of Scripture that is turned into a hymn that the church uses in its worship.

You will know the four passages or at least the ideas contained in them as soon as I say them. The first is called the *Magnificat*. It is taken from the Virgin Mary's words after the announcement made to her by the Angel Gabriel. The title "*Magnificat*" is taken from the Latin translation of the verb "magnifies." This is how the passage goes.

^{ESV} Luke 1:46...And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

Now the second hymn or canticle is called the *Benedictus* and is taken from the words of John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, in Luke 1:68 where he praises the God of Israel for the promise of the coming Messiah. The word *Benedictus* means "blessed be." It goes like this:

^{ESV} Luke 1:68..."Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people⁶⁹ and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David,⁷⁰ as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,⁷¹ that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us;

The third hymn or canticle taken from the early chapters of Luke is called the *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. It is perhaps the most familiar to us as Protestants because of its incorporation into the Christmas carol *Angels We Have Heard on High*. The phrase, *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, is a Latin rendering of the words "**Glory to God in**

the highest" and was spoken by the angels to the shepherds on the night of Christ' birth.

^{ESV} **Luke 2:13**...And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ **"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"**

The fourth hymn and the one taken from our text this morning is called the *Nunc Dimittis*. That is a Latin translation of the first few words of Luke 2:29...**"Now let your servant depart."**

The whole passage goes this: **"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel."**

Now this prayer, the *Nunc Dimittis*, has been used for many, many years been used in the evening prayers of both Catholics and Anglicans, and you can understand, I think, why that is the case. The imagery and words it employs are almost perfect for God's saints to pray right they drift off to sleep. That is why in western Christianity it has long been associated with the Compline service, the service of evening prayers right before bed. Because of its familiarity it has also become the source or subject of some of the most beautiful hymnody in the history of Christianity. All of that is understandable but strange. It is strange, of course, because in its original context the prayer prayed by Simeon was not about sleep at all. Rather, it was a prayer about his readiness for death.

You see, Simeon had lived his life his whole life in hope of one, solitary expectation. You see Simeon had been promised by the Spirit of God that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. And apparently Simeon had lived in expectation, in solitary expectation of that great day. There is no hint in the text of his fearing that day or dreading the realization of that day. Rather, the only hint we can draw from the text is that Simeon longed for that day not in some sort of morbid desire to speed his death along but rather for the joy of the promise itself. Though the text does not say he is old. I think it is something we can assume from his mention of being prepared for death. Look with me at Luke 2:25.

^{ESV} **Luke 2:25**...Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

You can see, I think, the point of the passage. Simeon is described as a "**righteous man,**" which means he behaved towards others as he ought to have and he is described as "**devout man,**" which means he was faithful to all his religious duties. But the main point is that he had been waiting for a long time for the consolation of Israel. That is almost certainly a reference to Isaiah 40 and to the consolation God promised to provide in the person of the coming Messiah³. That point is made even clearer by verse 26 which says about as plainly as it can that he had been promised that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Now you and I have no way of knowing how long Simeon's wait was. I think we can conclude that it was a long time but we ought not to get lost in reflecting on things like Simeon's patience or our lack of patience or whatever because the

point is that Simeon knew God was true and faithful and as a result he waited and waited with expectation. And then one day the Spirit of God compelled him to get up and go to the temple.

Now there is a part of me that wished that the Spirit of God had recorded what Simeon was thinking or how he felt but instead it keeps the account brief and understated and let's our imaginations fill in the missing parts. Look at verse 27.

^{ESV} **Luke 2:27**...And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ²⁹ "**Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word;** ³⁰ **for my eyes have seen your salvation** ³¹ **that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,** ³² **a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.**"

Oh can you imagine the joy Simeon must have felt. How he must have gloried in the fact that he held in his own two arms the hope of the nations and the promise of God's salvation. How he must have gloried in the faithfulness of God and in the beauty of the child and the beauty of God's promise to let him see it come to pass. It reminds you. I think, of the passage in Samuel where Samuel anoints David with oil and the Spirit of the Lord rushes upon him. Anyway, the text says he took him into his arms and he blessed God and he offered up a wonderful blessing and prayer that has long since come to be known as the *Nunc Dimittis*. It is called that because of the first two words of the Latin translation of the passage...it means, "Now, *oh Lord* let me depart..."⁴

Now the reason for his being ready to die is that he has seen the salvation of the Lord. But he doesn't just say that and then let it go. He fleshes out what that means by saying, "**Now, oh Lord, let me depart for I have seen your**

salvation...the salvation that you promised in your word to me...a salvation you have prepared in the presence of your people...a salvation that is to be a revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your own people the Jews."

Now what a wonderful prayer all that was. What a glorious thing for a set of young parents to hear. Now wonderful Mary and Joseph respond the way they do in verse 33.

^{ESV} **Luke 2:33**...And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him.

But as mentioned earlier the prayer...the prayer that has been turned by the church into a hymn...is both wonderful and sad. It is wonderful for the glorious truth it contains in verses 29-31 but it is sad...infinitely sad because of what it adds in verses 34 and 35. Notice that this sad word is spoken not to the couple but to Mary alone.

^{ESV} **Luke 2:34**...And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "**Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed** ³⁵ **(and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.**"

Now there are two ways to understand what Simeon meant in this word about falling and rising. He may have meant that people need come to despair of their own righteousness (that is, that they need to fall) in order to learn to trust in Jesus' redemptive work on their behalf if they ever hope to rise in the resurrection. Or he may have meant, and I think this is more likely, that Jesus will divide people. That is this wonderful matchless Son of God...this long, promised Messiah will in fact divide people into two groups: those that trust in

Him and those that do not. Those that do not trust in him will fail or fall eternally and those that do trust in him will rise eternally.

I think you can see how that second idea makes more sense in light of what actually happened in history and I think it makes more sense in light of the verse that follows it, where it says Jesus be **“a sign that is opposed so that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”**

You see the Lord Jesus always does that. His person and work always reveal what is in the heart of a person. It reveals whether a person is counting on their own righteousness to satisfy the demands of God or whether they are relying on the promise of God’s Word as was Simeon that He Himself would provide a righteousness to cover us over in the redemptive work of Christ on the cross.

And that seems sad to me...but it is not the sadness that I had in mind at the beginning of this message. Rather the sadness I had in mind is the sadness contained in brackets at the beginning of verse 35 where Simeon tells Mary through the Spirit of God the sobering truth that one day, **“a sword would pierce through her own soul also.”**

Now I don’t think it takes any sort of stretch of the imagination to realize that Simeon was talking about the day when Mary would see her sinless, son crucified and pierced for sinners. You see Mary would be there when the Lord Jesus was crucified. She would see here sinless Savior die for the sin of the world and it would pierce her own soul not simply because she was his mother according to the flesh but also because it would be her sin in part that held him there on the cross.

You can see, I think, how this fourth hymn of Christmas is a marvelous hymn of promise...a marvelous hymn of promise both wonderful and sad. You see it was our sin that nailed Christ to the cross. It was our sin that pierced His precious side. It was our sin that caused him to suffer the penalty of God's divine justice in our place. And the reality of that truth is painful and hard to bear, just as hard and painful as it was for Mary, and yet we do bear it and we bear it in gratitude and thanksgiving because we know in our hearts that our sin has been put away, that God's wrath has been satisfied and that one day whenever God determines it is time we will be able with Simeon to look forward to death with joy and gladness at the prospect of it will bring of seeing the Lord Jesus face to face. And when that occurs we will be able to say with Simeon, "It is enough Lord. Let now your servant depart in peace."

Let's pray.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, "The Presentation of Jesus (Luke 2:22-40)" in *Worship* 51 no. 1, January 1977, 7. It should be noted that Brown notes the patterns but throws out the historicity of the text. Of course, he would argue that the salvific aspect of the message is in no way impeded by its historical inaccuracies. I am unable to go along. I still believe the text as it lays and believe that it is both historical and inerrant. I suspect that Brown's view has since been amended.

² I suppose of all the music ever written, I love the music of Christmas best. Now I am not talking about the shallow sentimental stuff associated with Christmas in our time. Rather I am talking about those songs and hymns connected to the great historic reality of the incarnation. I love this line of poetry from George Macdonald and the stanza after it from the hymn by Charles Wesley:

Where did you come from, Baby Dear?
Out of the everywhere into the here.

Let earth and Heav'n combine, Angels and men agree,
To praise in songs divine, Th' incarnate Deity,
Our God contracted to a span, Our God contracted to a span,
Incomprehensibly made Man.

³ ^{ESV} **Isaiah 40:1**...Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the

LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

⁴ Obviously, the "Oh Lord" is not in the first two words but can be supplied when explaining what it means because it is a prayer.