

Nunc Dimittis, Christ Brings Light and Peace

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Bible Text: Luke 2

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Please take your Bibles and turn to Luke chapter 2. The Nunc Dimittis, the song of Simeon has something atmospheric and affecting about it. It has been loved by Christian people from the very earliest days. It appears in the fourth century apostolic constitutions. In the fifth century, Gregory the Great introduced it to public worship and at the time of the Reformation, Hugh Cranmer inserted it into the prayer book for use at the end of evening prayer. Our purpose, of course, in coming to it today is that it has something relevant to say to us. It is the word of God but it also has something relevant to say to us at this time of year. Some of us enjoy this time of year. It's a time when old traditions come to the fore. My goal every Christmas is to get my tree up before any of my children get theirs and their goal is to try to beat me which they have not succeeded in doing. One of my goals is to decorate the house better than any of theirs. There is a competition going. Their goal in life is to outstrip me but they will never get there because I've been longer at it than they have. And one of my goals at Christmas is to enjoy absolutely everything about this season, to enjoy every carol we sing. To enjoy even listening, even listening to 101.1. Yeah, even that, and find some pleasure in the enjoyment that everybody else is taking out of Christmas because it is a great time of year.

I think we Christians of all people knowing the real reason for the season, should be the most joyous of all people. But I understand that this morning as we come to church, not all of you feel like that. Some of you are really behind in your shopping and you're depressed. And some of you are finding the tensions that emerge when you've got children at home, it's great to know that in fact, you can get to a stage in life where you get past that but if you're in the middle of that, you know the tensions that emerge at this this time of year as excitement levels rise, frustration levels rise, shopping woes rise, all of that. But there are even worse things than those things. For some people, Christmas is a time when you remember those that you have lost this year. You remember those who will not be there to celebrate it with you in person or your conscious that your family is far away and most of them will not get here to spend Christmas with you as our experience this year again. Others of you just simply would like to have a family and would like to have children to enjoy Christmas with and have never had that pleasure in your life and so for you, Christmas is really something you'd rather celebrate in the Caribbean or as far away from here as possible. In other words, there is even in our secular enjoyment of the season, a mixture of joy and anguish and as we approach the text this morning, as we come to these early chapters of Luke's Gospel, when the theme

really is the birth of Jesus and all the surrounding concomitant parts of that story, you will find that up to this point, it's almost been a note of uninterrupted joy.

Yes, apart from the initial stages, I imagine that Mary seeing the angel and being terrified by him and then hearing the angel's message and would be even more terrified at that, had a lot to get over in those initial moments but all of that has now gone. There has been great joy from Elizabeth, that distant relative whose baby leaps within her, you remember, at the arrival of Mary and her unborn baby. There's been the language of Mary herself as she has burst into ecstatic praise of God for all that he has done. There has been the words of Elizabeth confirming that the song of Zechariah, the song of the angels reported by the shepherds and Mary has come to this stage in her life now where the baby is actually born. He's here and she's caring for him and nursing him and loving him which reminds me, by the way, of one of my biggest verbal faux pas of my entire life because in the UK, when you talk about nursing the baby, you merely mean cradling the baby in your arm, okay? When I came to Canada many, many years ago as a 25-year-old, I talked about going and nursing the baby and wondered why it was that everybody in the room was laughing at me because I know what it means here and you know what it means here. and Mary was nursing the baby in that American sense, okay, and feeding the baby and so on. So there was great joy.

Well, we've come to a point this morning in the story where the joy is shot through with anguish. Let's look at this together because as we come to this passage and I must remember we're talking about Simeon. Apparently in an earlier service I was talking about Zechariah through most of the sermon and nobody knew what on earth I was talking about. We're talking about Simeon, I'm reminding myself, in this passage this morning and Simeon is going to be talking about Jesus. And we find the Messiah presented in this little section as the holy one, the expected one and the rejected one. First of all, he appears in the surroundings or context of the story as the holy one. If you were listening very intently to the reading, you would have noticed that there are four references in our reading this morning to the law of God. In verse 22, Mary is purified according to the law of Moses. Verse 23, according to the law of the Lord. Verse 24, verse 27, and it reaches its climax in a fifth reference that we didn't read in verse 39, "When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth."

So the emphasis right at the very beginning of the story of Jesus, before he's even said a word, before he's done anything, before he is out of diapers, the very first things we're told about Jesus is that passively, as an infant, everything is done correctly. Everything is done according to the law of the Lord and that shouldn't surprise us because when the angel came to Mary and announced what was going on in her womb by a miracle of God, he said to her, "That holy thing that is conceived within you shall be called the Son of God. This is a work of God. It's a holy work of God and the one that is conceived in your womb by this miraculous work of God, is the holy one of God." And so we find several ways in which Jesus' holiness is underlined in the story.

First of all in verse 21, we have the circumcision of Jesus. At eight days in Bethlehem, he is circumcised and he is named. He is called Yeshua, meaning "Yahweh is Savior" or "Yahweh is salvation." Right at the very beginning of the story of Jesus, in other words, you have the shedding of his blood in circumcision bracketed at the other end of his earthly life by the shedding of his blood on the cross and what brings those two blood sheddings together is this: both of them were according to the law of God. Both of them are because Jesus is identifying with the people of God. He is identifying with human beings and he is identifying with those who are the children of Abraham. Circumcised according to the law of God, fulfilling the purpose and will of God in his own life even passively as an infant, being taken on the eighth day to be circumcised. And that's very important for this reason: it's part of this bigger picture that Luke paints. In chapter 3, he will remind us that Jesus is the son of Adam, the Son of God, that he comes into the world as a human being to be a second and last Adam and to do what the first Adam failed to do. He has come to obey God's word, obey God's law and so when we see Jesus being circumcised, here he is passively obeying the law of God but he is doing it not as a private person, he is doing it as a public person like the first Adam. He is taking our place in his humanity and he is passively in his humanity being subject to the law of God.

We see this not only in his circumcision, but we see it also in his presentation, the presentation of Jesus in the temple. About 40 days after his birth, he is taken to the temple primarily for the purification of his mother but also we're told, for his presentation to God. The background to this is that in Jewish law and the law of God, the mother of a male child was unclean for seven days and then was confined at home for a further 33 days when she could neither visit nor take part in any religious service. At that time, after 40 days, after the birth of a male child, she was to offer a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons and the Lamb as a burnt offering or if you were very poor, you could substitute a dove for a lamb as a burnt offering or if you were very poor, you could substitute a dove for the lamb. In fact, that's what this family did indicating their poverty at this point. Now the reason for this was this: firstborn males were the property of God. Here's what the Scripture said, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord." That's a summary statement of a number of Scripture passages including Exodus 13 where all the firstborn sons that were spared by the angel of death. You remember at the time of the Exodus, the angel of death comes to visit Egypt. He's going to kill every firstborn son in Egypt whether they're Israelite or Egyptian or whatever race they were. It was a total judgment. God had every right to do it because he has every right to judge all of us, "the wage of sin is death." But he was going to accelerate it on the part of those firstborn male children in Egypt. But on that night you'll remember God made a provision. It was a provision that could have been adopted by an Egyptian as much as by an Israelite. It was open to all: kill the lamb, dab it's blood on the doorpost and on the lintels and the angel will pass over you

And from that night, from the deliverance of the firstborn in that night, every firstborn male born into an Israelite family was devoted to the Lord and so a lamb had to be killed. When they brought their child to the temple, they were doing more than the law required. Most parents would just go up to the temple themselves if they went at all and they would offer the required sacrifices as an indication that they were fulfilling the obligation of the

law on behalf of their children. Mary and Joseph go further, they bring their child to the temple and we wonder why they did that and the answer as to why they did that is in what is omitted from the record that Luke gives us. Most families, you see, would pay a ransom price so that they didn't have to leave their child at the temple. They would pay about five shekels, not very much, in order to ransom their child and take him home with them. That five shekels was a kind of payment to the Levites. The clan of the Levites had been appointed in the temple in place of all the firstborn sons of all the clans of Israel. They served in their place. Sometimes an individual could do this like Samuel in the Old Testament. You remember that his mother had presented him at the temple and later brings him once he's weaned and leaves him there. Mary and Joseph perhaps have that in mind as they bring their son into the temple. And Luke omits the payment of the ransom price which perhaps helps us to understand that very enigmatic, they just in the next section of Luke's Gospel when as a boy of 12, they've gone to the temple and do you remember Jesus and his family are separated and on the way back, they realize he's not with them and they go back looking for him. Retracing their steps, they go into the temple and there he is in the temple, in discussion with the rabbis and when they interrupt him, he says to them, "Have you forgotten something? I must be about my Father's business." Mary and Joseph, I think, bring him to the temple, unusually bring him to the temple because it is their opinion that he as the holy one of God has to be wholly in the service of God and they perhaps had forgotten it. They had perhaps forgotten the implications of what they had said earlier or done earlier when later on at the age of 12 they find him there in the temple on his Father's business.

Well, let me back off from this. Why is it so important that Jesus should fulfill the law right at the very beginning of the story? It is because you and I don't fulfill the law even passively when we're children and our parents are in charge, the law is broken. There is a reminder to us, you see, that it's possible even in infancy to be responsible for breaking the law, that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The lawbreaking is not just when I set out to determine to break God's love but this happens all the time. We are all the time breaking the law of God. Moses emphasizes these little incidences in order to underscore the fact that Jesus as an infant passively by his parents' actions, is fulfilling that law and in his later life, you find him in the desert representing Israel, being tempted by the devil and over and over and over again, he repeats "The law of God. The law of God. The law of God." He keeps the law of God perfectly and he does that for his people because his people don't just need him to die for them, his people need Jesus to live for them. They need a representative and a substitute, someone acting in their place who keeps the law they cannot keep, who has kept the law in all of its particulars on behalf of his people. That's the kind of Savior we need and we need one who is by definition the holy one. The holy one, for only the holy one can introduce us into the presence of God who is holy.

But the second thing we see from the story is that he is also the expected one. Look at what we read in verse 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." We're not told anything about his rank or his vocation, we're only told about his spiritual condition. We're told he was righteous and devout, two expressions often used in the Bible about

believing people. By the way, they are not used in an absolute sense. They're only absolute when it comes to describing God. God is absolutely righteous and absolutely devout but his people can be relatively righteous and relatively devout. That's all we ever are, by the way, this side of glory. So what you would say about these people is this, as far as they could in the way they were living their life, as far as you could see, these were righteous and devout people. That's a good thing.

But not only that, we're told they were living in the hope of God's intervention. They were waiting for the consolation of Israel and what we find as we come to these early chapters of Luke's Gospel is that the number of believing Israelites has been reduced considerably. They are the minority within Israel. Here is a church, a nation church, Israel, and the believing component of that nation church is now very small, just a few believing people who are waiting for the consolation of Israel. At the beginning of our service this morning, we had a lovely piece from Handel and you remember Handel's great piece, "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people says your God." This language of consolation comes straight from Isaiah 40 where Isaiah the prophet predicts a day when God will come and comfort his people. He's talking to people who have been in exile. He understands as a prophet that that exile is not only going to be the component period of time in Babylon but that exile is going to be the hallmark of Israel for some considerable time to come. By the time Jesus arrives, they had been in exile over 500 years. First they did time in Babylon, then under the Persians they come back to Jerusalem and Judah but they're still in exile in their own land because the Persians ruled and then the Greeks ruled and now the Romans rule. They are still in exile in their own land; they're still waiting for the consolation of Israel.

These people like Simeon, are waiting for God to act and if you find yourself in the minority, then you'll identify with Simeon. If you're a minority in your own family, if your own family are unbelieving and resistant to the things of God, you'll know what Simeon and Anna and others understood as one of that believing remnant. Or if you're part of a church and that church is getting increasingly away from the law of God and the word of God and the Gospel of God and you're part of that minority within the church that actually listens to the voice of God and wants to do the will of God, you'll understand how Simeon feels at this point in his life, waiting. Waiting for the work and will of God. God has always worked with a remnant out of humanity and worked with a remnant even in the church. I know enough to know that not everybody in this room who comes regularly actually listens to the word of God and does it. Like Ezekiel, the word of God sometimes comes to you like a beautiful song there in the periphery of your mind and it comes and goes and it's gone.

Simeon's song reminds us that we need to listen to the word of God. These people, Simeon, Anna, Elizabeth, Zechariah, represent the end of an era. Luke is the only Gospel writer who quotes Jesus as saying, "The law and the prophets were until John," John the Baptist, "since then the Gospel of the kingdom of God is preached." Up until John the Baptist, the rule of God is proclaimed through the law and the prophets but now with the arrival of Jesus, the word and the rule of God are going to be encountered in a new way. The kingdom has arrived partially, but it has arrived. Up until John, up until this moment,

people like Simeon and Anna have been living by faith in the promise of God but now the era of fulfillment has come. The kingdom of God is now present. That's what he's saying as he sees this child.

Well, Simeon was not only godly and expectant, we're also told that he was blessed. The Holy Spirit was upon him and it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord, Christ. There are three references to the Holy Spirit in our text. Verse 25, the Spirit was upon Simeon. Verse 26, the Spirit reveals Simeon will not see death until he sees the Messiah. Verse 27, the Spirit moves Simeon to go down to the temple one day just at the right moment and as he is going into the temple, Mary and Joseph and the baby are coming out of the temple and they meet and that's the crucial moment in the drama. Simeon is given a promise that he will not see death until he has seen the Lord's Messiah.

It was that expectation that must have brought him down perhaps every day to come and scan the faces of those who are going into the house of God. You can imagine him standing in a corner watching. Watching. What are you looking for when you're looking for the Lord's Messiah? I imagine every time you saw some great tall hulk of a guy coming along that looked every inch as if he could be a king, he wondered to himself, "Hm, maybe that's him." Or if he saw somebody who was really, totally handsome and attracted the attention of everybody he was walking past and you thought, "Well, maybe that's him." Then there came that day when a poor couple with a baby walked past and the Spirit of God inside of him prompts him and he looks at that baby and he thinks, "That's the Lord's Messiah." Isn't it an amazing thing? And you ask yourself the question, "How did Simeon get to get a word of God that something amazing like this would happen before he died?" Most of us don't get anything like this in our entire lives. You know, in the Bible there are two kinds of people: there are people in the Bible who are given promises that are fulfilled in their lifetime like Simeon; there are other people in the Bible actually most of them, who are given promises from God that they never, ever see fulfilled in their entire lives. Abraham is given a promise that one of his offspring would bless the whole world. He never sees it. He never sees it.

Why do we have those kinds of people in the Bible? I think those people are in the Bible for your sake. They are in the Bible for your sake because you will never see some of the things that have been promised to you as the children of God. You will never see your dead family members raised from the dead in your lifetime. You will never see this poor broken body, this dying body, resurrected and transformed into Jesus' glorious body in your lifetime. You will not see the renovation of this planet. You will not see nature and humanity and God reconciled in your lifetime. And there are promises of God for your family and you may die before they come to faith in the Lord Jesus. Promised experiences like those of Simeon are in the Bible as a way of God saying to you, "Learn from their experience. When I make a promise I keep it. I put Simeon's experience in the Bible so that you could read it this Sunday morning and know that every promise I make I keep. Whether it happens in your lifetime or not, I keep every one of my promises. Read their experience and know their experience will ultimately be your experience." Not one word of God will fall to the ground and be broken.

What did Simeon expect of this Messiah? He expected that the Messiah would bring salvation, do you see? He says this, "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation." My eyes have seen your salvation. Simeon is saying, "It's arrived in this baby." The day has arrived, his shift is now over. That time of expectation has gone. The promise has been fulfilled. He could die in peace not because with a sense of peace, not subjective, not with peace of mind, nothing like that but the peace, the objective peace of knowing that God's promises and Israel's hopes have now been fulfilled and realized. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." He takes the child in his arms and he says, "My eyes have seen your salvation." Jesus, salvation. Salvation, Jesus. See Jesus, see salvation. See salvation, see Jesus. The two are inextricably one. He says, "In seeing this child, I have seen the salvation of God."

He says secondly, "In seeing this child, I have seen the light, the light of the Revelation to the Gentiles." Here is this man steeped in Judaism, do you notice, and yet he has this global vision. His mind is saturated in the language of Isaiah the prophet who says in Isaiah 49, "I will give you as a light to the goyim, to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." He grasped that. He understood why that light was needed. It was needed because so many people's minds and hearts were locked in darkness. In the language of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4, the Gentiles are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts. That light needs to penetrate through the hardness of their hearts. Isaiah 42, "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon. I am the Lord."

And in our day and age, that darkness still grips the minds and hearts of people today. Even though in this Christmas period, no matter how often we get it into the news or into the reports that it's about Jesus and that Jesus is the reason for the season, nonetheless that invincible ignorance is still there, that darkness is still there. And yet we need to say along with Simeon that this Savior is the Savior for the world. He comes to bring light to the nations. He is the Savior of the world. There is no salvation anywhere else. We need to say clearly to the world whether it's the Islamic world or the Buddhist world or the secular world, "We don't want laws that alienate you or that oppress you but we want to say this to you and this is the best news we can give to you and we're loving you by saying this because we'd be hating you if we kept this news from you: Yeshua, the Messiah is the only salvation on the table for everybody." There is nothing else. There is nothing else that God has provided. There is no other name under heaven given among men by which you must, you must be saved. A light for the Gentiles and glory for your people, Israel.

Again, Isaiah gets some mention here, "Arise, shine for your light has come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon you." He's singing about the glory that was to come to Israel. Let me say this: there is no basis at all within Christian thought for anti-Semitism. We find our roots as Gospel people in all that God has revealed to us through Israel. We are

sons of Abraham. By adoption, we are sons of Abraham. We are Israelites by adoption into the family. Everything we know of God, we know through Israel. When the prophet said, "There will come a day when people from all over the place will go and grab the robes of one Jew and say, 'Teach us the truth, show us the way to God,'" let me tell you that billions of Gentiles all around this world today are going to the robes, at least symbolically, of a Jew and they're taking hold of the robes of one Jew called Yeshua and they're saying, "Teach us the truth. Show us the way to God." And there is salvation nowhere else because Jesus said, "Salvation is of the Jews."

At this Christmas time, we celebrate that great event. God has kept his covenant promises. Jesus is the glory of his people, Israel. The glory that rested on the tabernacle now rests in Jesus Christ. He is full of glory. Full of glory. He is the expected one. But thirdly, he is the rejected one. Look in the language here of verse 33, "And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him." Well, they would, wouldn't they? They had heard so much now. It's accumulating all these many things, remarkable things that had been happening. "And Simeon blessed them." And if that's where it had ended, that would have been good but I want you to notice that's not where it ends. As they are enjoying the blessing, he goes further and he says to Mary, "This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel." Picking up the language of Isaiah 8, a stone that will cause Israel to stumble and Isaiah 28, God lays in Zion a foundation stone, a testing stone, a cornerstone. The stumbling stone is going to be the foundation stone for a new Jerusalem and a new Israel and a new temple but by coming into the world, he will cause an irremediable division within humanity, distinguishing from the saved to the lost, judging and dividing people to accomplish the will of God and especially in Israel, he will divide opinion. His coming will cause a fracture in the life of Israel and distinguish between believing Jews and unbelieving Jews. He will come to his own place and his own people will reject him and he will have to take the remnant of believing Israel and form a new church and a new Israel. The coming of Jesus causes division and his coming by his words still causes division. It causes division in the church between those who believe his word and those who don't. Between those who repent and those who won't. Between those who have ears to hear and those who will not hear. His coming causes a division in the world, between those who come to him for salvation and those who reject him. Jesus comes to cause division. I would be lying if I didn't tell you that. I'd be holding back truth you need to hear if I didn't tell you this. Jesus by his coming, will cause the falling of many and the rising of many.

And unbelievably and in particular, he says to Mary, verse 35, "A sword will pierce through your soul also." You know, the preparation of Mary for the arrival of Jesus was quite elaborate. You read the story again. Just go to Luke chapters 1 and 2 and you see how much care and attention God puts into preparing the context, the background in order that Mary might get her head around this amazing miracle that had happened in her womb, this conception that had happened in her womb with all the concomitant effects of that, of her little boy growing up, known as Mary's son with a big question mark, "I wonder who the father was?" You can imagine, she needs to be prepared for that. She needs to be prepared for that. But there were some things she needed to be prepared for that was even greater than that. With all these promises ringing in her ear, a devout

Jewish girl, woman, older woman, saturated in the Scriptures but nonetheless a child of her time, thinking, "If this child of mine whom God has given in this most miraculous way is going to be the Messiah, then, well, everything we want the Messiah to be will be victory upon victory, glory upon glory, triumph and liberation for Israel."

You can only imagine that his rejection, his crucifixion, which would destroy any mother, would in Mary's case have led to the utter dissolution of her personality. There would be no Mary left and so God in his grace prepares her for that. As soon as she is ready and able to hear it, he puts in her mind this caution and then graciously and I think the way he does it is so kind, graciously following this warning, sends Anna along to confirm that the good stuff that had been promised will come. It will still come. I think if that had been reversed, let me tell you this, she would have lost sight of the good stuff and only focused on, "What does he mean? What does he mean? What does he mean by this pain? Heartbreak?" But God in his graciousness reminds her in the very order in which these things come that though there will be heartbreak, though there will be extreme anguish, there will be ultimate joy.

Here we have the picture then, Jesus, the Messiah, the holy one, the expected one and the rejected one. And Simeon says, "Now that I have seen the Savior, I can die. I can go. I've been there. I've done that. It's going to be okay. I may not see him grow up, I may not see how he brings in the kingdom, I may not see how this looks going forward but I know now that God's Messiah is here." And there is a sense in which you and I when it comes to the day of our death, are able to say something like Simeon, "We have seen the salvation of God." We have seen more than Simeon saw. We have seen him come, we've seen him rejected, we've seen him crucified, but we've seen him risen and we've seen him growing his church and we've seen him begin to fulfill the promise to Abraham as all the nations of the earth are being blessed by his coming. And we can die knowing that God keeps his promise; die knowing that he will raise our bodies and make them like Jesus' risen body; die knowing that he will bring about a new heaven and a new earth; die knowing that one day we shall walk in Immanuel's land and see the King in his beauty and behold the Lamb that is at this moment faraway and be home.

I want to ask you this morning as we come up to Christmas: do you have that confidence? Do you have that assurance? Are you resting, trusting on Christ the Messiah for yourself? Only you can answer that.

Let's pray.

Father, we ask that you would please write your word on our hearts and enable us at this time to grasp hold and rely confidently on our Lord Jesus, we pray. Amen.