

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)
First Sunday of Christmas – December 26, 2021
Luke 2:22-40 – Death and Life at Christmas
By Vicar Peter Wagner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. Hear again from the gospel for the First Sunday after Christmas, from Luke 2, “**And [Simeon] took [Jesus] up in his arms and blessed God and said, ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’**” This is our text.

Christmas is by definition a celebration of new birth, the birth of Christ, God in flesh bringing us new life. We celebrated Jesus’ nativity only yesterday. In his sermon yesterday Pastor preached that Jesus is born to give us second birth through baptism. So it seems out of place that the appointed texts for the days right after Christmas focus heavily not on new life, not on new birth, but on death. The texts for today and the coming days are overwhelmingly about dying, because the season of Christmas is reminding us why Jesus was born. He was born to die, to be sacrificed as the Lamb of God, to take away the sins of the world by his atoning death on the cross.

Let’s preview some of the readings for the Christmas season. First of all, today. In addition to being the first Sunday after Christmas, today on December 26 we also commemorate the death of the first martyr of the church, Saint Stephen. The account of Stephen’s brutal death by stoning is recorded in Acts 6 and 7. At his trial before the high priest, Stephen faithfully confessed God’s mercy throughout Israel’s history. But then he confronted the Jews for resisting the Holy Spirit, persecuting and stoning the prophets. And now, said Stephen, they even added to their sins by betraying and murdering the Messiah himself. So, ironically, the Jews responded to his sermon by proving Stephen right, proving they were just as wicked as their ancestors. We read, “**Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And he said, ‘Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.’ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him.**”¹ What a shocking choice for the church to meditate on the day after Christmas! But there’s good reason for this choice. The ancient church fathers had an apt saying, “**Yesterday Christ was born in the world, so that today Stephen would be born in heaven.**”²

That’s not all. After celebrating the martyrdom of Stephen on December 26, the theme of death continues. Tomorrow, December 27, is the commemoration of Saint John, the last of the apostles to die for the faith. If Stephen was the first martyr of the church; John represents the last, persecuted in his old age and imprisoned on the island of Patmos. The gospel text for tomorrow is from John 21, when Jesus alluded to how John would die. The point is that from first to last, all saints who die in Jesus, all will awake to new life in paradise.

That’s still not all. After the feast of Saint John, on December 28 we commemorate the Holy Innocents, the babies of Bethlehem murdered by Herod. The text for Tuesday reads, “**Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.**”³ Just as it’s appropriate to celebrate at Christmas the birth in heaven of all the saints, it’s also appropriate to remember the death of the very first martyrs, the babies who died even before Stephen, on account of the birth of Christ. And although we won’t have church on Tuesday, we’ll transfer Holy Innocents Day to next Sunday. So next Sunday, when you come to church, you are going to hear a sermon about Herod and the murder of the babies of Bethlehem. How quickly the joy of the birth of Christ evaporates into grieving and mourning!

This brings us back to our Gospel for today. Simeon waited all his life for the consolation of Israel. The Jews waited for the Messiah for so many centuries. But now Simeon is in the temple, holding baby Jesus in his arms. He is very old and about to die. Yet the Holy Spirit has revealed to him that he will not taste death until he sees the Lord’s Christ. And now the Spirit reveals to him that this baby is the one foretold by the prophets, this is the Messiah. The wait is finally over, Advent is finally done. No more waiting, no more delay. Christmas is here. Jesus is here!

¹ Acts 7:54-60

² Valerius Herberger, quoted in *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, p. 1057

³ Matthew 2:16

So Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and praises God, with tears in his eyes, **“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”**

Simeon recognized Jesus as the promised Savior, but he also understood that Jesus would save by dying. He said to Mary, **“Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”** The sword that would pass through Mary’s heart would be her grief when she saw him nailed to the cross. Jesus would be pierced for our transgressions, he would accomplish the fall and rising of many by his death. And Jesus was also pierced for Mary’s sins, she watched her son die for her. By his coming, Jesus revealed and exposed the evil thoughts in all our hearts. To those who reject him, he stands as a sign opposed. Those who reject him are appointed for falling, for eternal death. But those who receive him in faith receive all the benefits won by his death: salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.

We can safely assume that Simeon died long before Jesus grew up. He never saw Jesus on the cross, he never saw Jesus raised from the dead. But Simeon died in peace, because he had seen God’s salvation. Unlike Mary who witnessed Jesus’ whole earthly life, unlike John who touched Jesus with his hands and stood with Mary at the foot of the cross, unlike Stephen who saw heaven opened and Jesus standing at the right hand of the Father – unlike all these saints, Simeon never saw Jesus’ crucifixion with his own eyes. He only held a helpless newborn baby and believed this was the one. Only the Holy Innocents showed greater faith than Simeon, for they didn’t even know why they died, they simply trusted God’s mercy.

And like Simeon, you can also rejoice, for you also see God’s salvation. Not with your physical eyes, but with the eyes of faith, through God’s word. This is the point. Simeon was ready to die because he saw Jesus the same way we see Jesus today, with the eyes of faith. God revealed to him that this baby was the Savior of Israel, and he simply trusted God’s word. He believed it by faith, the same way that we believe God’s word that Jesus is our Savior.

So learn from Simeon to fix your eyes not on your daily troubles, not on fear or death, but on your Savior. Like Simeon, pray eagerly day and night for the coming Messiah, that Jesus would come back quickly to deliver and redeem us. See him by faith on Christmas, laid in the manger. See him by faith on the cross, dying to save you. See him by faith on the third day, risen in glory and ascending on the clouds of heaven.

And though we cannot see him now with our physical eyes, in the Lord’s Supper we do see him with our eyes. We see him there in his body and his blood in the bread and wine, we receive him in our hands to eat and drink just as Simeon held him in his arms.

We recognize Simeon’s song because we sing it every Sunday right after receiving Jesus in the Lord’s Supper, as a song of thanksgiving. In our hymnal it’s called the Nunc Dimittis, Latin for “now you dismiss.” **“Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation...”** But the Nunc Dimittis is far more than a dismissal from communion. When we sing the Nunc Dimittis, we’re saying that because we’ve received the body and blood of Jesus who died for us, we are ready to die, ready to depart in peace to be with the Christ child.

Our elderly members and shut-ins understand this most intimately. They know each Lord’s Supper could be their last. That’s why they look forward so much to receiving communion when pastor visits. I wish I could bring them communion too, since I know how precious it is to them, but as a vicar I can still bring them God’s word, I can still sing them hymns and witness their faith in their Lord who they love so much. They’ve never seen Jesus with their eyes, but by faith they look forward to the day very soon when they’ll see him face to face.

What about you? Are you ready to die, to depart in peace? Once you’ve tasted your Lord by faith in his Supper, not doubting but firmly believing these words, **“given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins,”** you can depart in peace, you can fall asleep in Jesus. For Jesus is the salvation prepared for you, for all peoples. He is your light, he reveals salvation to all of us Gentiles. He is the glory of the new Israel, the church, the glory of all God’s people.

And finally, we know that Mary’s grief, the sword which pierced her heart, was a sword that did not last. Her grief soon gave way to the joy of resurrection. And in the same way, by faith in Jesus, you know that death is only a gate to eternal joy in heaven. Death is but a slumber. On the last day Christ will return to call you out of the grave. So now depart in peace, with rejoicing and thanksgiving, for you have new life in Christ the newborn king.

And now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.