

Celebrate Christmas (Part 3)

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[0:00] Let's go.

Stand with me as we honor the reading of God's Word together, beginning in Luke 2, verse 21. And to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

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. 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. 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, he took him up in his arms and he 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 in Israel.

[1:52] And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. 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.

And a sword will pierce your own soul also, so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. May God add a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated?

Amen. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in 1807, and he died in 1882.

In his lifetime, he became well acquainted with grief that few experience. His first wife died when she was six months pregnant at the age of 22.

And then 25 years later, his second wife died in a tragic accident. While he was taking a nap, he suddenly awoke to his wife's panicked screams.

[3:04] Her dress had accidentally caught on fire, quickly engulfing her in its flames. And Henry feverishly attempted to try to put out the flames.

However, by the time he had put them out, his wife's body had been severely burned, and she died the following day. Sadly, Henry was unable to attend her funeral because of the burns that he'd endured while trying to save her life.

Later, he confessed that during this time he was so consumed with sorrow and so inconsolable that he feared that he would be taken away from his six children and placed in an insane asylum.

So we can only imagine the emotions that welled up inside of him once more when on December 1st of 1863, he received a telegram informing him that his eldest child, Charles, had been severely wounded during a battle in the Civil War.

Charles had been shot in the left shoulder, and the bullet traveled across his back. It skimmed his spine, and it exited out his right shoulder blade.

[4:27] When Henry arrived, the first surgeon he spoke to was not very optimistic about Charles' prospects for recovery. If he lived, the surgeon told him he'd probably be paralyzed for the rest of his life.

And you know, as a parent, that there are few things, if any things, that bring you more suffering than watching your own child suffer.

So on Christmas Day of that year, 1863, with his country engaged in a war against itself, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, age 57, twice widowed, raising six children, the oldest of which had been severely wounded, sat down, brokenhearted, and composed a poem.

That Christmas morning, he had heard the Christmas bells declaring peace on earth, goodwill to men. But the suffering he had experienced in his life seemed to contradict their message.

However, the Lord used those clanging old church bells to restore him, to remind this man of many sorrows, of the hope that he had eternally in the one whose suffering had purchased his salvation, bringing him everlasting peace.

[5:57] That poem, A Christmas Carol, you all no doubt know it well, I heard the bells on Christmas Day, and I want to read it to you. I heard the bells on Christmas Day, their old, familiar carols play, and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

And thought how I, as the day had come, the bell freeze of all Christendom, had rolled along the unbroken song of peace on earth, goodwill to men. Till ringing, singing on its way, the world revolved from night to day, a voice, a chime, a chant sublime, of peace on earth, goodwill to men. Then, from each black, accursed mouth, the cannon thundered in the south, and with the sound the carols drowned, of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

It was as if in an earthquake rent the hearthstones of a continent and made forlorn the households born of peace on earth, goodwill to men. And in despair, I bowed my head.

There is no peace on earth, I said. For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, goodwill to men.

[7:21] Then pealed the bells more loud and deep, God is not dead, nor doth he sleep. The wrong shall fail, the right prevail with peace on earth and goodwill to men.

These are not the words of someone desperate to believe anything in order to numb the pain that he's feeling. These are words spoken from a man who has suffered tremendously. He has lost tremendously.

He has experienced that tremendous loss in a sin-cursed world. Yet he knows an eternal hope and a resolute faith and a Redeemer who left the glory of heaven behind to dwell among us.

On that Christmas day, Longfellow was reminded of the Son of God. whose unmatched suffering brought him eternal peace and everlasting joy despite his circumstances.

And so, as followers of Jesus Christ, we celebrate Christmas because we know that Christ has come. He left the glories of heaven behind to dwell among us.

[8:38] He didn't come merely to show us a better way to live or bring balance to the prevalence of evil in the world with his goodness. His task was more important.

He would preach a message that brought hope to the brokenhearted, that restored joy to the downtrodden, and that offered a peace that surpassed understanding. He procured our peace on the cross and he secured our hope through his empty tomb.

We rejoice because he has come and because he will come again. So we celebrate Christmas.

Luke chapter 2, verses 21 through 35, which we've just read, isn't a text that the church typically focuses on during this time of year because it doesn't seem like a Christmas text, but I believe that it is.

Luke includes it, after all, as part of the birth narrative of Jesus Christ. And I think he's done so because it has a great significance for us as we celebrate Christ's first coming.

So when Jesus went to the temple to have him circumcised on the eighth day, there was an old man present and his name was Simeon. And he'd been waiting for a very long time for this day to arrive.

[10:01] God had revealed to him that he would have the tremendous pleasure and privilege with the opportunity to meet the Lord's Christ.

And so, as Mary and Joseph passed by the place where he was, the Holy Spirit stirred his heart, revealing to him the true identity of this newborn baby.

So, unable to constrain himself, he got up and he took that baby into his arms, holding it closely, no doubt close to his heart, treasuring him.

Then, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he thanked God and he blessed Mary and Joseph. But then he focused his attention specifically on Mary.

And he said to her, Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is opposed.

[11:11] And a sword will pierce through your own soul so that all thoughts from many hearts may be revealed. Now, imagine, at our next baby dedication here at church that I do something similar, right?

And we do do something similar. We thank God for the child. We ask for a blessing upon the child and the parents. But imagine then I turned to the mother and I said to her, I just want you to know

that this child will bring a sword that will pierce your own soul.

The mother would probably be very eager to grab her baby away from me, would she not? And many of you would think I'm crazy.

At the very least you'd think, what a rude thing for Pastor Mike to say to those poor parents. And so perhaps for that reason this text isn't referenced much during Christmas time.

In fact, there's no Christmas carol at least that I can think of that this text is used for its inspiration. It's not read much in church services around the world during this time of year.

[12 : 27] But I think that it should be because through it we are reminded of the true meaning of Christ's coming which we celebrate at Christmas.

Often our celebration of Christmas both in the secular and Christian world focuses almost entirely on how the coming of Christ means peace on earth and certainly it does as we've seen here the past couple of weeks.

But seldom do we reflect upon the price that that peace cost and what peace with God results in this life for those of us who have experienced it.

It's a peace that comes through suffering. Like a surgeon for example. How does a surgeon bring peace to your body if it has a tumor?

Well he must spill your blood. He has to get to the source of the pain in order to remove it. But getting to the source of the pain is going to be painful. And it's your only path however to wellness.

[13 : 38] Christ's peace comes to us in a similar way. Jesus speaks to this very thing in Matthew chapter 10 verse 34. He says do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth.

I have not come to bring peace but a sword. Now this doesn't mean that he's come to incite violence. His intention is to reveal that his coming into our lives creates conflict.

But it's a conflict that comes as a result of peace. So here's the main idea for this morning's message.

Christians celebrate Christmas because they know the great peacemaker. Though knowing Christ means experiencing external and internal conflict, they realize the joy of having peace with God even while suffering as a result of Christ's coming and the hope of his soon return.

So how do you know that you have peace with God? Well at least I think we see here in this text one way that you know that is through conflict.

[14 : 56] Both of the external and the internal variety. The Bible says that being associated with Christ will put you in conflict. Conflict is something that most of us dread.

But in this case we shouldn't because this is a conflict that brings assurance to us. Assurance that you've experienced the peace of God through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Knowing that you have this peace then means celebrating Christmas in a way that expresses an understanding of its true meaning. And so this passage provides us with two truths about the Christian's peace.

The first one is this. Peace with God creates external conflict. Peace with God creates external conflict. Returning to our text we read that the first part of Simeon's prophecy is that Jesus will cause both the falling and the rising of many and that he will be a sign that is opposed.

In other words what Simeon is telling Mary is that Jesus will have a polarizing effect on people. Many will love him and many will hate him.

[16 : 21] And that creates conflict. Jesus explains the reason for this in John 3 19-20. We were there not all that long ago. He said and this is the judgment the light has come into the world and people love the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.

For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest his works should be exposed. Then later on in his ministry in Matthew 10 Jesus speaks to the reality that peace with God puts believers in conflict with the world.

As he sends his disciples out in verse 16 he tells them behold I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Then he tells them in verses 24 and 25 that they will be hated for their association with him.

Why? Because everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light lest their works should be exposed.

I once heard the testimony of a man who was a police officer in New York City and he was saved while working there and in being saved obviously he was born again he was transformed and he realized that a lot of the things that he was doing were things that he should not be doing.

[17:41] One of the things he was doing is he was taking bribes with some of the other guys on the force to look the other way from drug dealers and different other characters and the things that they were doing that they didn't want the police to interrupt with and so he realized this was wrong and so he stopped taking the bribes well soon enough his fellow police officers started to approach him and say hey what's going on they were really uncomfortable that all of a sudden he had changed his ways that he wasn't taking these bribes and they threatened him that he needed to take them or else and so after receiving some anonymous threats himself and his family as well he moved away he had to leave why because light makes the darkness uncomfortable being a Christian means being like Christ and being like Christ will put you in situations where people are furious with you simply because you are being like

Christ because your Christ likeness exposes them for what they truly are and so the manger at Christmas means that if you live like Jesus there won't be room for you in a lot of ends I had some really good friends and close friends I felt like for many of them they were like brothers to me in college and if you've heard my testimony you know that was not a time when I was pursuing God's will or call to ministry in my life later on I did and when that happened over time I realized that I was no longer welcome with them like I used to be!

I would get on social media and I would see that one of them had been married and my other buddies were there I wasn't obviously different times they would get together and I wasn't there but they were no invitation or anything like that and maybe you've had similar experiences and for me I know that being a pastor automatically sometimes just makes people really uncomfortable to be around me that's just part of the deal but I understand too that since I've given my life and surrendered to Christ and his ministry that that means that I'm not welcome in a lot of places and if you know as a Christian you've probably had similar experiences as well there's just some places where people would rather you not be at least they would not want your Christian witness to be there and of course our experiences are nothing compared to those of others the Christians who lived the first century Christians they were not welcome by Roman society because they refused to participate in their festivals and their feasts and their other immoral practices they refused to worship other gods they refused to offer them to acknowledge Caesar as lord the exclusiveness of their Christian beliefs and conviction that Jesus was not just a god but the god put them on a collision course with nearly everyone in that religiously pluralistic society it wasn't a conflict that they were looking for but again darkness hates light falsehood hates truth so these believers were excluded from Roman society for their exclusive beliefs Christians were often disinherited by their unbelieving families they were excluded from positions in government people refused to do business with them or purchase their wares they were increasingly abused imprisoned and later executed for sport in our secular society today non-Christians have been becoming increasingly hostile towards

Christians seeing us as a potentially great threat to their social order our stance on homosexuality abortion transgenderism you name it and our refusal to exchange the world's truth for God's truth has resulted in increased tension between secular society and the church things are headed towards greater conflict but not by our choosing but because darkness hates light but though we don't seek this conflict we shouldn't avoid it either we should engage in the conflict for the purpose of offering peace not seeking peace for ourselves but peace for them just as Christ our great peacemaker came into this world to bring us peace with God so we seek to do the same just as [22:50] Jesus told us to do Matthew 5:9 he said blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God and then later on in verses 44 and 45 he said but I say to you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your father who is in heaven for he makes his son to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust in order to be peacemakers like Jesus we must then engage in the conflict like he did but understand that the instrument that we use when we seek peace is not our fists but the word of God truth that Jesus came that Jesus has purchased our peace with God through the cross to do so meant that he'd face conflict and so it is with us too just as our peace came through conflict so we too seek to bring that same peace we don't hide the light that

Christ has illumined in our hearts but we put it on a lamp stand on full display so that this dark world we pray will see the light and believe and know Christ the great peacemaker as we have come to know him and so Christmas is a great time for us to share the gospel at Christmas unbelievers tend to express a desire within themselves for peace it's displayed in all of those Christmas movies

people coming together people reconciling people seeking a greater purpose for their life this is all because the great truth is written on their heart the truth of God they know that this world is not as it should be they know that they are not as they should be and at this time in our society when our political leaders are so divided and as their divisions threaten to further divide our nation now is a great time for the church to step up and be the light that Christ has called us to be entering the conflict in order to bring peace we'll need to depend on Christ and his word to do that but I believe that we can because we know the great peacemaker whom we celebrate at Christmas that our Emmanuel has come that he has purchased our peace through conflict and so we do the same knowing that whatever we may lose for Christ's sake will be worth it because one day we will see our Emmanuel face to face second truth is that peace with God creates internal conflict external conflict internal conflict so again Simeon's word to Mary he says a sword will pierce through your own soul also and certainly for Mary that was precisely the case we know for example that she stood near the cross as she watched her son die surely these words came to her mind as she was watching him on the cross like everyone else she had no expectation of such an early and terrible death nor did she expect such a marvelous resurrection three days later but at Christ's crucifixion it must have seen to her as to all of his disciples that the cross was the bloody incomprehensible end to all their hopes and dreams to that terrible disillusionment Mary could add the unique agony of having outlived a child watching him taking his last breath with her own eyes but even before this Jesus' ministry created confusion for Mary if you remember in Mark chapter 3 we are told that Jesus' mother and brothers found his claim in ministry to be strange we are told that they came to the place where Jesus was staying because they thought in verse 21 it says that he had lost his mind when they arrived where Jesus was ministering they called out to him but Jesus retorted he said who are my mothers and brothers and then he looks around at his followers and he says here are my mother and my brothers whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother he concludes so at that moment Jesus was not disavowing himself of Mary and his half siblings but he was revealing that as we all as well as they knew him they didn't truly understand at least to that point of his true purpose for coming Mary is one of the most admirable people in scripture I think she was incredibly intelligent and I think she was wise beyond her years as evidenced by her response to Gabriel's message and also the reasoning that she used as she discerned these different messages that she was hearing about her son and so no doubt she is a person to be admired however like everyone else around Jesus she was seriously mistaken by the true nature of her son's mission she attempted to stop him just as Peter later on would attempt to stop him they attempted to obstruct him from fulfilling his purpose in coming from the cross which purchased our salvation and this was an enormous miscalculation on all of their parts she wanted to protect her son as any good mother should but there was no avoiding the sword that would pierce her soul and so to me

[29 : 22] Mary stands as a representative of everyone who loves Jesus if you love him if you have him in your life then a sword will pass through your heart as well there will be inner conflict there will be confusion at times and great pain as well you'll get things wrong you might want to fight him thinking you know better and that it's your will that should be done why do we do that why do we do that well I think J.C.

Ryle the 19th century Anglican bishop explained it well in one of his messages about Christmas he began by saying the child of God has two great marks about him he may be known by his inward warfare as well as by his inward peace in other words when you put your faith in Christ many struggles come to an end come to an end the struggle to prove yourself to find an identity to have meaning in life that can handle suffering to find true satisfaction all of these things become resolved in Christ however a new set of struggles are touched off by coming to faith in Christ that's why Ryle can say a true Christian is known not only by new peace but also by new conflict in that message he continued on to explain there are thousands of men and women who go to churches and chapels every Sunday and call themselves

Christians while they live their names are in the baptismal register they are reckoned Christians while they live but you never see any fight about their religion of spiritual strife and exertion and conflict and self-denial and watching and warring they know literally nothing at all such Christianity is not the Christianity of the Bible he says it is not the religion which the Lord has founded and his apostles preached true Christianity he concludes is a fight the new peace Christ brings doesn't come without conflict I want us to consider two ways again in which that is true first God's peace

comes after the inner conflict of repentance repentance is like antiseptic you pour antiseptic on a wound and it stings but it heals that's how repentance works it creates inner turmoil within us because we hate to admit things that we'd rather not we hate to acknowledge our weaknesses and inability however it is through doing so that new peace the peace of forgiveness and reconciliation come but there's no way experiencing that new peace without the inner turmoil of repentance and then second

God's peace comes through the inner conflict of willing submission in Romans chapter 6 and 8 Paul talks about the inner warfare between the Christian's old self and new self the old self wants to continue to be your master but the new self knows the peace of letting God be God in your life when two wills are present there will be conflict however with each passing conflict as we learn to submit to God's will we go deeper and deeper into his peace I don't know if you're either excited that 2019 is coming to an end or saddened that 2019 is coming to an end I know for me personally for some reason I feel like odd numbered years are better for me so I don't know why that is but I am a little I have a little bit of trepidation you know 2020 pretty even and so about as even as it gets but we can understand that no matter what this world may experience in 2020 no matter what it may bring for you personally or for our church collectively for our nation we can rest assured that no matter what it brings that we can face it that we can face it because

Jesus took the ultimate sword for us Genesis 3 describes how God exiled humanity from his presence as a result of their sin excluding them from the tree of life and when he did that we are told that a flaming sword was put in place to guard their way back to that tree that was another way to say that the wages of sin is death and then the entire Old Testament bears witness to this reality because every time sin is atoned for in the tabernacle or in the temple a substitute animal goes under the knife and dies what was God doing when he sent his son on Christmas what was he doing what was the son doing when he ventured towards the cross he was coming underneath the sword and it came down on him

[35:11] Isaiah 53:8 by oppression and judgment he was taken away and for his generation who considered that he was cut off from the land of the living stricken for the transgression of my people Jesus Christ came ultimately to take the wrath of God's sword from us and to be pierced with it himself he entered into our world of darkness our world of conflict in order to bring peace and we understand for those of us who know Christ that we have experienced a great peace but it also brings conflict what do we do with this message well two things first expect conflict if you're going to live your life for Christ in this world especially in this country especially there will be conflict it's not something that we should hide from or think it's strange that God is punishing us in some way because it's come we should expect it and then secondly as we expect it we should also be a peacemaker as we experience that conflict we seek to enter into it to bring peace peace how do we do that we tell people about

Jesus Christ we tell them about why he came we talk about the cross we talk about the resurrection we talk about his soon return we talk about the fact that everything written in our heart this peace that we long for that Christ is our peace that Christ is our peace and that's what we celebrate at Christmas I just want to say in conclusion that as we end this year and I'm focusing on next year for our church and looking at where we'll be next in John chapter 3 the one word that continues to come to my mind is commitment commitment I believe that will be the theme for our church next year you know what commitment means it means that we aren't afraid of the conflict that we're ready and we're willing to go why because we know the great peacemaker and we have a great desire to be committed to his great commission which was to be committed to go to the people and to the places that the rest of society has forgotten to not be afraid about what the cost might be but to know that whatever we do here in this world in the name of

Christ will be more worth it than we could ever realize or imagine till that day when we see our Emmanuel face to face and then we'll know