

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

Luke 2:22-35; Matthew 2:1-12

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I was so impressed with the children of the church last week. Last Sunday, I did the children's sermon and asked them to tell me what's going on this week, fully expecting them to say, "Christmas!" And I think they're the only children this side of Episcopalians who would answer, "It's the fourth Sunday of Advent." Very impressed? So I pushed a little further and asked them, "What's happening this week?" And this time they knew what I was getting at. They said, "It's Christmas." I said, "And what's happening on Christmas?" and I was fully expecting the onslaught of you-know-who is coming down the chimney and we're going to get presents and all this kind of stuff, but they just told the story. These kids told the story of Caesar calling people to their hometown to be enrolled for a tax and Mary and Joseph making their way to a town called Bethlehem and that there was no room in the inn. And there, that night, in a stable, because there was no other place to stay, Jesus was born. There was no place to lay him, so they placed him in a "feeding box," I believe one of them said. That place was holy somehow and that baby was the Son of God. And wise men and shepherds came to visit the baby, prompted and led by angels and by a star in the sky. The kids knew the story.

Well done, parents. And well done, teachers. You've done a good job of teaching the kids the story. I suspect that some of them knew it better than some of you. And some of you are glad that you weren't sitting up here cross-legged on the floor, being prompted to answer questions. We're proud of our kids for learning. You've done a good job of informing and teaching these kids. Well done.

And that was on the front side of Christmas. All of the anticipation and joy and the wonder was yet to come. We were still looking forward to it. And then we come to Christmas Eve, where we light the big fifth white candle. I even remember as a kid, waiting for that last candle to be lit. Because as soon as it was, it's here! All the waiting and wondering and anticipation had finally arrived. And that night, there's such a majesty. Even if you're a cynical person. Even if you're distracted by job and family and other responsibilities, there's something about that night that's hard to resist. Something about the holiness of that space that just feels like God is in it. Maybe it's that candle. Maybe it's that last candle being lit and a sense of wholeness and completeness that comes over you, that comes over the room.

So that was then and this is now. Now we're on the backside. Now we're standing here looking back and I wonder what happened. What was that all about? It seems like something that's worth getting our minds around. We talk about the story, but what does it mean? It depends on who you ask, I think. It depends a bit on what your perspective is. But no matter who you ask, it seems that it has something to do with the world changing.

For a man named Simeon, it was that he could die in peace. Simeon was an old man. He was a good, righteous man. He was good all the way through. It wasn't just an outward show. He was good on the inside and devout to God in his inner being. He was looking forward to the consolation of Israel, so says the second chapter of Luke. He wasn't the only one. It was a rough time in Israel. God had long ago promised his messiah. The people were still waiting for him. Rome was still in power. The people were waiting for God to deliver the one that He had promised. In that, Simeon was no different. But he was different because God had promised him that he would not die until he had seen the messiah. So, every day he went to the temple to pray, to ask God to send his messiah.

And then, one day, in walks a little family. A bewildered Mommy and Daddy holding a little baby, and Simeon walks right up to them and takes the baby out of the Mommy's arms and looks at it and says, "Lord, now you're letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation, that you've prepared in the presence of all people. A light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory to your people, Israel."

For Simeon, it meant that God is faithful—that those old promises are new and fresh today. It meant that what God said a long time ago comes to fruition today, even in our lives. That God is faithful. Simeon is not done, though. He has a message for Mary. I don't know if it's good news or not. It must have been troubling news. Mary and Joseph, as Luke said, were already marveling about what's been said about Jesus. But Simeon has something to say to Mary: "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 soul, also."

In a way, this message is true for all parents. It's been said that having a child is like taking your beating heart and ripping it out of your chest and watching it walk around for the rest of your life. When your child falls and skins her knee, then you hurt. When your child is mocked or rejected by his friends or is insolent, then you're hurt as well. When your child gets broken up with by a girlfriend or boyfriend or even a spouse, then your heart breaks. This is true for all parents. Your soul is pierced when you watch your children live their lives and make mistakes, get hurt, and your soul rejoices when theirs rejoice. So, in a way this is true for all parents.

But for whom is it more true than Mary? How could she have known standing there this day what would happen by Jesus? What would happen as she watched him grow and be rejected and arrested and crucified? How could she have known standing there on this day how her soul would be pierced? This mother who said that all generations would call her blessed, how could she know what would happen to her in her life? But God was faithful to her, too. And all generations have indeed called her blessed. Despite what she went through watching her own son in agony, all generations do indeed see her blessedness.

And so God is faithful, we learn through Simeon. What does this all mean to Mary? Well, Mary must have been bewildered by all of this, but Mary knew that somehow this was going to change her life. Even before Jesus was born, Mary knew. In the first chapter of Luke, she even says this prayer, sings this song. We call it the Magnificat, when we're trying to be fancy. That comes from the first line where Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. For He has looked on the humble estate of his servant. Behold, now all generations will call me blessed. For He who is mighty has done great things for me. And holy is His name." Mary saw that Jesus' arrival meant a reversal for her. Did you catch it? I was down and God is lifting me up. God is turning me upside down. But it's not just a personal reversal that she's anticipating. It's a world reversal because she extends this to the entire world. She goes on to say in the Magnificat: "Mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away."

Did you hear it? Did you hear the reversal? And Mary's anticipation? Down is up and up is down. The rich and proud are going to be brought down. And the poor and hungry are going to be lifted up. For Mary, Jesus' arrival means that there is going to be a great reversal. A new world order is coming. Jesus, in his parables, will even talk about this as an adult. A Samaritan is called good. A prodigal son is welcomed home to honor. Someone sells everything he has to buy a pearl of great price. Jesus will talk about this great reversal and then he will even live it: the dead come to life. But, even before Jesus says a word, even before Jesus tells a parable or performs a miracle, the world is turned upside down by him. Of course, this is not good news for everyone. Because if the world is turned upside down, it's good news for those on the bottom, but for those on the top, it's not necessarily good news.

That brings us to Herod. You know the story of the Three Wise Men; sometimes I think that they were the Three Dumb Men. They're following the star all the way from the East and they're carrying their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, bringing them all the way to Israel. And they're following the star to find the king of the Jews—the new king of the Jews. And who do they go to—the current King of the Jews! This is not smart because the news that there is a new king of the Jews is not good news if you're the King of the Jews.

So Herod greets them: “Welcome to **my** palace. Welcome to **my** kingdom. You’re looking for the King of the Jews. Well, you’ve found him.” “No, there’s a new king of the Jews.” “I see. Well, why don’t you go find him and let me know where you find him so I can come and worship him, too.”

Well, the Wise Men wised up, found Jesus, brought him their gifts and then they departed by another way. Herod was furious.

We’re always discontent when it seems that what we own and what we claim to be ours might be taken from us. And Herod was. He was furious. He didn’t know when the baby was born. He didn’t know where the baby was. So Herod ordered all baby boys under the age of two in his kingdom be killed. Joseph had heard in a dream to take Jesus to Egypt to flee the oncoming onslaught. But all those babies. It’s extraordinary what lengths we will go to protect that which we think we own and that which we think we’re in control of. There’s a Herod in all of us. There’s a part of our lives that we say is our kingdom, not God’s—and you can’t have it. And I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you from being Lord of that part of my life. No matter who it destroys or who it hurts. It’s mine and not yours.

Jesus’ arrival means that a great reversal is happening. What’s old is new, what’s up is down, what’s mine is God’s. And the apostle Paul even experienced this reversal in a bit of different way, separated a bit in time and distance from Jesus’ arrival. Paul looks over the landscape of humanity and sees all of humanity enslaved. All of humanity bending under the weight and burden of ourselves and our own laws and our own ways and customs. Our own attempts to be righteous before a God who is completely holy. Our own attempts to make right what is wrong. Our own attempts to create justice by taking an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. And what should become cycles of redemption, as we give to one another, become cycles of violence as we take the eye, and another eye is required and yet another eye. Paul looks out at all humanity and says we are all enslaved.

The lead singer of U2, Bono, has a word for this. He made an interesting point in an interview recently. He said all religions are based on karma. Now that’s interesting. I thought that was just Hinduism and that karma is where you live a good life. And if you live a good life, you’ll be reincarnated into a better life next time. And if you live a bad life, you’ll be reincarnated in a worse life the next time. And so you get what you deserve. But he made an interesting point. He said that all religions are based on this: you get what you deserve. If you’re good, something good will happen. If you’re bad, something bad will happen. The Old Testament certainly is. God will bless you if you live a good life. God will curse you if you live a bad life. We’re called to the same kind of ethics: Do good to those who do good to you; do bad to those who do bad to you. That’s why Job’s story is so confusing to people—all that was undermined. Here’s a good man to whom terrible things happened. So all religions are based on this idea of karma, that you get what you deserve. And Paul looks out and says, “That’s right. Look at the slavery that puts us under.” But Jesus’ coming changes all that. This is the way that Paul puts it: “God sent forth His son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the spirit of His son into our hearts crying, ‘Abba, Father.’ So you are no longer a slave, but a child. And if a child, then an heir through God.”

The way Bono puts it is that in Jesus, the world shifts from karma to grace. That everything changes. We are not bound anymore by this karma. Instead, we’re released in grace. The group even sings a song named “Grace” and the lyrics are worth looking at. The song concludes, “What once was hurt, what once was friction, what left a mark no longer stings because grace makes beauty out of ugly things. Grace finds beauty in everything.”

The world was changed when Jesus came. Jesus’ arrival, before he said a word, before he performed a miracle, before he went through his passion—just simply that he *is* means that the molecules of our world are changed. It means that everything is different. It means that we can have the moral imagination to see the world in a different way. It is as if Jesus’ arrival means that those who see, those who believe, put on night-vision goggles to see the world in a different way. But actually what’s happened is that those in Christ, we take

off the goggles the world has given us and we see the world God intended. It's about grace and not about karma.

What this means to me was recently made real on a football field in Texas. It sounds a bit pedantic, but if you haven't heard the story, stay with me for a minute. A couple of months ago in Grapevine, Texas, a most remarkable thing happened. The most unusual football game was played that was ever played, between Grapevine Faith and Grapevine State School. Grapevine Faith is a private Christian high school. They have everything they want. They've got a nice field, fancy equipment, parents who support them, a nice school bus to transport the team. It's a successful high school with a successful football program. Grapevine Faith is everything you could want your school to be. They were playing a game against Grapevine State. Grapevine Faith's record was seven and two going into the game and they were a good team headed to the play-offs. Grapevine State's team was zero and eight. They'd only scored two touchdowns all year, so pretty much knew what was going to happen, even the before the game started.

But the coach of Grapevine Faith said that this game's going to be different. He sent out a message to all his fans, all his supporters and parents and said, "For one game only, for one time only, what if half of our fans cheered for the other team? What if half of our cheerleaders went to the other side? If we don't, the stands will be empty. There'll be no parents there; there'll be no one cheering for them. What if we send our group over to that side?" Because for Grapevine State, their parents aren't there to support them, the stands are empty when they play. They have shoulder pads that are seven years old and helmets that are ancient. After every game, when the other team's players are going home with their parents, the Grapevine State players are lined up in rows of twos and they're handcuffed and put back on the bus to take them back to juvenile prison.

So the Grapevine Faith coach said, "Let's send a message to these players. Here's the message I want you to send. Jesus Christ loves you and so do we. You are just as valuable as any other person on planet Earth." And so they did. The Grapevine Faith parents made a spirit line for the State players to run through onto the field. And half of them filed into the stands on the State side. When State was on defense, they yelled, "Defense! Defense!" and "Sack the quarterback!" Yeah, the mom of the quarterback was yelling, "Sack the quarterback!" And "Block that kick!"—it was the mom of the kicker who was yelling, "Block the kick!" And when they did, she and the fans went crazy, cheering for them. The State players were confused by this, wondering, "Why are they cheering for us?" The Faith players were confused, too. Before the game, one of the Faith players went into the office of Chris Hogan, the coach, and said, "Coach, why are we doing all this?" Coach said, "Imagine if you didn't have a home life. Imagine if everyone had pretty much given up on you. Now imagine what it would mean for suddenly hundreds of people to believe in you."

It's no wonder that State played their best game of the year. They scored the final two touchdowns and when the final whistle blew they gave their coach a Gatorade squirt bottle bath. It was probably the first time that a zero and nine team had given their coach a Gatorade bath. One of the players said, "We can tell that people are a little afraid of us when they come to the games. You can see it in their eyes. They look at us like we're criminals. But these people were yelling for us... by our names." When the final whistle blew, all the players gathered in the center of the field and took a knee for a prayer. And one of the State players volunteered to pray. The coach said he had no idea what he was going to say, but his name was Isaiah. He prayed this: "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank you. But I would never have known there were so many people in the world that cared about us." On the way out, the coach for State grabbed the shoulders of the Faith coach, looked him in the eye and said, "You'll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You'll never, ever know. Tonight, my players are one step from heaven. My lost, lonely players, my children, who've been abandoned and abused, my players who are guilty, who are criminals, who've been forgotten, my people for whom there's no hope, it seems. Who are destined to live a life of frustration, desperation. My children. The ones who are living an abandoned life, as if no one on earth loves them or cares for them. My children tonight are one step from heaven."

Coach, that's right. Tonight, we all are.