

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

First Sunday After Christmas

December 26, 2021

Psalm 111:1–10 (ESV):

Great Are the Lord's Works

111 Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

2 Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

3 Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

4 He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

5 He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.

6 He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.

7 The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy;

8 they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

9 He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name!

10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.

His praise endures forever!

First Reading: Exodus 13:1–2, 11-15 (ESV):

Consecration of the Firstborn

13 The LORD said to Moses, 2 “Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

11 “When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, 12 you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD’s. 13 Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. 14 And when in time to come your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. 15 For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’

EPISTLE: Colossians 3:12–17 (ESV):

12 Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Gospel: Luke 2:22–40 (ESV):

Jesus Presented at the Temple

22 And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” 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.”

36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, 37 and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Return to Nazareth

39 And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

Sermon 52 – First Sunday After Christmas

“Opposing Sign”

Luke 2:22-44

Dear friends,

Our Gospel lesson has a lot going on, so its kind of hard to know what to zoom in on. Jesus is birth is auspicious, and Luke here collects a few different instances of how this is so. I'll talk about why he does this in a minute, but for now, remember that Jesus was probably one of many children born and consecrated during this time. In any given moment, you have children being born or even baptized. As we speak, there might be some babies being delivered in Riverton hospital, for example. Life goes on around us. But Jesus isn't just a baby, He is also God, and He is come to do a special thing as you know. The words about Jesus here are supposed to not only remind us of that, they're supposed to frame for us what Jesus is going to do, what we're intended to learn from Him. I find these words curious. What people say about Jesus here doesn't sound like how we would describe His work. If someone came to you and asked you, basically, “who is Jesus and why did He come?” You would tell him, well, Jesus is the Son of God, He was born as a baby, and He came to die on the cross so that we would be forgiven, or something like that. That's not what these people say. Let's see if there's anything to learn from that.

Luke writes his Gospel like a research paper. Luke is a learned man, a physician, and he sets out to put together His Gospel by interviewing eyewitnesses who were there. Luke isn't one of the twelve apostles, but he is close to them, and this approach of seeking out witnesses to interview gives him some unique insights and stories compared to the other Gospel writers. Both of the people highlighted here do not appear in the other Gospels, probably because their writers didn't think to ask them. Luke does. He's thorough and leaves no stone unturned, no story untold, and these are the stories he finds. Highly individual stories with fairly typical people, but these fairly typical people

were all told by God something about this baby Jesus who would come. Luke is doing this to be thorough, sure, but in the beginning of his Gospel Luke says that he wants us to be certain that what we've been taught is true. He uses these stories to help reassure us that we're not crazy, this baby Jesus will grow up to be general contractor Jesus who will take on the role of Messiah when His time comes. Luke shows you these things as proof that this baby wasn't just a typical baby.

This is kinda long, so I'm going to be somewhat selective in my quotes. Luke describes the requirements of the Law around the childbirth of a first male. You had a baby boy, this is what you did. Then comes the first witness. **“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.”** Simeon is just a guy, he isn't famous, but he is known. And the Holy Spirit, for reasons that go completely unexplained, tells Simeon that he would see the Christ before His death. This is a fascinating bit of care for Simeon, because he is described as waiting for the consolation of Israel, which means Simeon is waiting around for God to do something meaningful about Israel's situation, as many were. The Holy Spirit tells him his wait is over. **“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.”** So Simeon gives us in the Nunc Dimittis, and foretells this child's destiny. Again, I find his words interesting. There's nothing straightforward here, just a lot of metaphors. My eyes have seen your salvation. A light of revelation. Glory to your people Israel. We can recognize what he's saying. The Gentiles will see God's light. We non-Israelites won't be excluded from salvation by default anymore. Instead, we'll see the light, just like the Israelites did. This is God's salvation, so he talks about that, but nothing about sin, nothing about a cross, nothing about dying or

rising from the dead. There's a lot of talk of consolation, too, as you'll see next. **“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.”** Simeon gives Mary a pretty hefty warning, but the descriptions are weird. The rise and fall of many in Israel, the thoughts of many hearts being revealed. None of that sounds like the Jesus we preach and trust.

It doesn't sound like how we talk about Jesus, but are these words wrong? Of course not. Jesus is the rise and fall of many. He makes us rise from the dead when we die, and He raises us up from our sinful state into real life. The Bible tells us that sin means we are dead, and Jesus is what makes us alive. Jesus is a sign that is opposed. What is he opposed to? Jesus is opposed to all that this world tells us, everything our hearts firmly believe is true. The world believes that this world, this life, is all there is. Our hearts trust that because this is all we know. The world believes it is living in the end, that all it knows is dying. Our hearts fear tells us the same, it's all going to be miserable and awful. Jesus gives us a sign opposed to all that. That this life isn't real life, real life, true life, is found in Him and in Him alone. We are pilgrims in this world, and whether it dies or not doesn't concern us. That is God's business, and we leave it to Him. Life isn't how good it is, or how bad, life is what God gives us to love and serve our neighbor, to delight in His promises and how temporary it is. Jesus is a sign that is opposed to everything we know and believe here, and it is a wonderful sign. Instead of death waiting for us, we have eternal life with Jesus. Instead of this life being a hopeless slog against impossible odds, we become servants of the God in charge of all this. Jesus is life, we are death, this world is empty and seems pointless, but God pours purpose, meaning, virtue, and beauty into it. He gives us a reason to carry on, because we serve Him and not our own empty pleasures.

Simeon also says that thoughts from many hearts will be revealed, which is super vague admittedly, but it squares up quite nicely with how Jesus comes at people in the Gospels. Jesus is not particularly interested in folks that try to sit the fence with Him. He seems purpose-built to get a reaction, either positive or negative, and Jesus is most willing to engage with people who come at Him either way. Jesus wants to be loved or hated, He

doesn't want to be regarded with bland curiosity. Why? Because He can work with both love and hate. Someone who hates Jesus is just as engaged with Him, just as interacting with Him, as someone who loves Him, and Jesus' mission is draw all men to Himself. To draw all men to the cross. Hebrews says that the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword and pierces to the marrow. Jesus shows us this beautifully. Jesus gets a reaction, He forces people to stand up and be counted, either as those that love Him, or those that hate Him. Remember the parable of the weeds and the wheat, the sheep and the goats. Our God is a dividing God, He separates people into two camps. Jesus is here to make this happen.

Why is this good news? Because Jesus is here to bring us into the believer's camp, to bring us into His embrace. Jesus doesn't cut people off, He puts them into their categories so He can change their hearts. Sometimes God will push us away, but only to draw us closer again. To elicit repentance and change from us. He did this with you and I. We're Gentiles. We were in the other camp, not on God's side. Jesus changed that. Jesus does the same for new souls every day. Simeon got to see the start of that with the baby Jesus, just as God had promised Him. You and I get to see the end of it, playing out in our lives today and in our world.

Amen.