

“Simeon’s Second Prophecy”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia
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Luke 2:22-40

Oh my, what a marvelous baby you have! He will cause plenty of trouble someday. The first comment is a typical compliment, polite and usually offered with complete sincerity. Most of us have probably said that about someone else’s baby, or received those kind words from someone else about our own. However, the second comment is heard considerably less often, and when someone does say that about a one-month-old child, it is almost always meant as a joke, one targeted at the parents, the suggestion being that the baby is a chip off the old block who will become just as troublesome as mom and dad.

Since the first statement is more familiar and congenial, we tend to focus on that portion of what the prophet Simeon said about Jesus. In fact, the beautiful hymn of praise Simeon uttered upon finally seeing the Messiah is contained in two of our four daily offices: Evening Prayer and Compline. It speaks of the sense of relief and release brought by the fulfillment of a promise. The song Simeon sings is full of hope, both for Israel and for Gentiles who will be drawn by the light of the Messiah to worship the one, true God. Here is a Messiah for the whole world.

No wonder Mary and Joseph “were amazed at what was being said about him.” We might expect that after the visit by the angel, Gabriel, announcing Mary’s pregnancy, followed nine months later by the visitation of the shepherds, sharing what the heavenly host had revealed to them, that Mary and Joseph would no longer be startled by such remarkable claims made by perfect strangers about their son, Jesus. But then again, who could ever become accustomed to such astonishing, laudatory comments? It would be as if persons of low and lofty estate, plus an

angel, had come to one of us saying, “This kid will be Emperor of Earth someday, after an All-Star career in both professional football and basketball. And, oh yeah, he’s going to find the cure for cancer, which will win him the Nobel Prize for medicine. No kidding, really, it’s going to happen.”

Of course, we tend to neglect the second part of what Simeon said. Those verses don’t appear in any of our daily offices, and it’s not hard to see why. Perhaps it would be helpful to review once again his parting words to the Holy Family. “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.” Mazel tov!

In other words, this kid of yours will shake up the status quo. The people who are riding high right now will wind up plunged to the depths, and the people crawling along in the gutter will be lifted up. Your little boy Jesus will generate opposition by bringing out the worst in people. His very presence will break down the screens that have concealed the rottenness inside the hearts of the corrupt, and you yourself will be confronted with a heartrending decision about whether or not you can accept the awesome reality of who this baby is.

“Wow! Thanks, Simeon, for your insightful prophesy, but we just came to keep the law, and since Jerusalem’s on our way back to Nazareth, we figured, why not do it right, and dedicate our firstborn at the Temple. We’re glad to have bumped into you. You have a great day, and, uh, we’re glad you feel OK about dying now, since you’ve had a chance to see our son.”

No wonder they were startled, even after everything else that had occurred. When Simeon told Mary and Joseph that Jesus was going to cause trouble, he meant it, and we’re talking serious trouble here: the reversal of the social order resulting in potentially violent resistance, a disruption against which Mary herself would not be immune.

As tough as it must have been for Mary to accept this prophecy, the really peculiar thing about it is that the prophecy was fulfilled, and we still choose to ignore it. Jesus did lift up the lowly, by consorting with sinners and healing the sick and choosing common fishermen and a thuggish tax collector to serve as his disciples. Jesus also threatened to displace the high and mighty, including the religious elite who made a living off having all the answers and the political establishment, which was concerned about his capacity to launch a popular insurgency. Those who opposed Jesus did resist him, violently, successfully conspiring to execute him on a cross, and no doubt, Mary had her doubts, as her innocent little baby grew up to be a man who created controversy pretty much everywhere he went.

Everything Simeon predicted in both prophecies came to pass, but we focus on the first, because of its hopeful promise of redemption, rather than on the second, which tells of the terrible mess to be made in the process. The second prophecy is an awful reminder that there are many who refuse to embrace Jesus as Messiah, precisely because of the change he brings, precisely because of the way he turns the world upside.

Even his most faithful followers occasionally resist the radical redemption Jesus offers, though our opposition to him is usually more subtle than the sort of overt violence Jesus encountered during his early 30's. Instead of nailing him to a cross, we confine him to the manger, the harmless child at the center of a pastoral tableau. We like our savior saccharine sweet, far from the troublemaker that Simeon predicted and Jesus eventually became.

Yet no matter how diligently we seek to smother Simeon's second prophecy with sentimentality, his prediction continues to ring true. Fulfilled as it was during Jesus' lifetime, Simeon's prophecy remains alive and relevant. The troublemaking redemption that got Jesus

killed lives on, and the same choice which confronted every person who met Jesus – resist, ignore, or follow – faces us daily as well.

How do we choose, when Jesus seeks to upset a way of being that we find pleasant enough, even if it frequently fails to meet God’s standards of justice and mercy? How do we choose, when Jesus attempts to recruit us as agents of his holy purpose? Do we run? Do we fight, or do we follow with humble obedience, despite the risk? These are decisions that are far from automatic. Plenty of well-meaning people either never took the time to notice Jesus during his earthly journey, or they actively sought to thwart him. It takes a deliberate act of faith to respond in a way that brings redemption, regardless of the possible loss.

Through the baby Jesus, we have been adopted as children of God, heirs of his eternal promise of salvation. May someone someday say of us to Jesus, as Simeon once said to Mary, “Oh my, what marvelous children you have. They will cause plenty of trouble someday.” And may that prophecy also come true. Amen.