

December 29, 2019

“On Adopting a Theology of the Cross”

From the Series - *The Christ Child: Under the Discipline of the Cross*

Throughout Advent we looked at the book of Ruth, which was such a gift after our time in the book of Judges this Fall.... And we discovered that there is tenderness and grace amidst deep brokenness. Now, we are in the season of Christmas... And, the tenderness and grace of God has come to us in Jesus. God in the flesh, born in the house of bread, Bethlehem...

TJ mentioned a number of times, a theme in the book of Ruth of going away empty and returning full... and of course there is no greater example of this theme than Jesus himself... The One by whom all things were made... leaving the glory of heaven, born to a poor family in a small town, to live in the brokenness of this world...
To be emptied, so you and I would be made full.

Christmas... is a festive, joyous time. It's a celebration. Advent, our time of waiting... of calling on Christ to come... is over. God has come to dwell among us.... So, there is reason to celebrate... And our culture of course takes that to the max. The festive joy of Christmas is something we all take part in. However, it often covers up the very gritty reality of life... And, the Hallmark versions of Christmas often cover up frankly, the terrifying situations of Jesus' birth, and the situations He and His family face early on.

Isn't that so like this world? --- That shortly after the angels sing and the shepherds leave filled with joy, and after our Christmas eve services of joy.... Almost immediately, the reality of the situation, the reality of life visits us... And yet we often don't want to see it.

Over the next three weeks, we're going to look at the three scenes of Jesus' childhood that we have in the gospels. We don't know much about the childhood of Jesus... Only these three scenes. And, all of them, already... begin to tell us that all is not right with the world... there is no "peace on earth, good will to men." They will tell us that even as the Christ Child, Jesus is being prepared for something....

The title of our short series is "The Christ Child: Under the Discipline of the Cross," which comes from John Calvin, the great 16th century French theologian, who said that from the time Jesus was born, as a young child... He was living a life... under the discipline of the cross... in the training, if you will, of the cross. Today, we come to the first scene... just days after the birth of Jesus... We're introduced to characters that make their one and only appearance in the gospels. And yet, what they say and do will mark the life of the Christ Child... What I want us to consider is this... If Jesus' entire life was lived under the discipline of the cross... In training for the cross... What does that mean for the follower of Jesus? If we are living a life under the discipline of the cross, how does that shape the way we face difficulty and suffering in our lives, and in the world...? And then... you and I are being disciplined under the cross...then after Advent... even after Christmas, what are we waiting for now?

As we look at the middle part of Luke 2 today, there are three points I want us to see that hopefully help us answer those questions. 1) The humble beginnings of Jesus' life. 2) Viewing Jesus' life with a Theology of the Cross. And, 3) Moving from Advent to Advent.

We notice from the passage, that Mary and Joseph are people who pay very close attention to the Law... Like all good Jews, they take Jesus to Jerusalem, to be circumcised...to receive the sign of the covenant between God and His people... But there are a number of other things that happen, that also tell us a great deal about this Christ Child. Jesus, is indeed circumcised... in every way, He is a Jew. The famous words of Paul in Galatians 4 – “He was born under the law, that He might redeem those who were born under the law.” Luke tells us the Child is presented and named Jesus – THE name the angel gave Joseph and Mary- a name that carries a divine purpose for the life of this Baby. The One who will free His people from their sins. But then there are two other ceremonies –There is the ceremony of the presentation of the Child, AND the ceremony of the purification of the mother.

Because this was the first-born child of Mary, the Levitical law required that the son be presented to the Lord, to be dedicated, that he “would be called holy to the Lord.” The other ceremony also came from the Levitical law, but it was focused on Mary, the Mother... the law stated that after the birth of a son, the mother was unclean for seven days, and for another 33 days, she was to keep away from all holy things.... The act of childbirth made her unclean... and so a purification was needed...

The law said the price for purification was a lamb, and a pigeon, or a dove... The priest would sacrifice the animals as a purification, and make atonement for her, and make her clean. But here, there is no lamb. Joseph and Mary, simply offer what they have, which is two doves, or pigeons... The law provided a provision for the poor – if you could not afford a costly one-year old lamb, you could offer up two small doves... And, that's what they do. Which very obviously tells us that Joseph and Mary were poor. They were not financially comfortable in any way. They gave as much as their circumstances allowed them, but they remained faithful to the law...

And this builds upon what we already know about the coming of Christ into the world. What we have celebrated the last few weeks. Jesus is born in THE humblest way. He is born without worldly glory, but He is the glory of heaven. He is born to a poor family, who have nothing to offer the world... The one BY whom all things were made, became flesh, and was circumcised, and was presented in a temple, like every other baby...

His mother and father could not even afford the lamb... all they can bring are two small birds, and yet THIS, is the Lord of all creation... This is the EMPTYING of Christ... Charles Spurgeon said, the One who is “infinite, and an Infant.” Mind-blowing. You know, one of the reasons so many people gravitate to Jesus, even if they're not Christians... the characteristic of Jesus so many in the world admire about Him... is His love for the poor, for the lower class. How did he have such love?? Because He was poor! He grew up this way. This is how the purposes of God were bringing Him along. We cannot lose sight of the humble, poor, seemingly forgettable beginnings of Jesus' life. This is what makes the plan of God so remarkable...

The people of Israel have been waiting for a savior, for the Messiah, to come... but in no way, did they believe it would ever happen like this... Why would it happen like this? It happened this way, because the purposes of God for the Christ Child, were not for Him to live a life under the tutelage of royalty, or worldly power, or prestige, and learn how to interact with influential people... St. Augustine, in one of his sermons wrote: "Our Lord came down from life to suffer death; the Bread came down to hunger; the Way came down, on the way to weariness; the fount came down to thirst."

The purpose of God for the Christ child was for Him to grow up poor. Unnoticed. Because this would be a life lived under the discipline of the cross.... And, almost all of the Jews of the day would miss it... But there were a few... there was a remnant... who saw it... And here is where we're introduced to two characters- a man named Simeon... and an elderly woman named Anna.

We know nothing else about these two characters outside of Luke 2.... Simeon, whose name in Hebrew means – "God has heard..." has some pretty remarkable things said about Him in this passage- v. ²⁵ *Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.*

As TJ has said a number of times in the last month, throughout the scriptures we see the invisible hand of God, moving people along according to His purpose... Luke says the Holy Spirit was on Simeon, in a unique way... Some commentators say, that it was a continual way... Or perhaps it was an incredible sense of the Spirit's moving in that moment... But we're told that Simeon had been faithfully waiting for the Lord to reveal His messiah.... And in fact, the Spirit had revealed to him that he would see the Messiah before his death...

And so that day, Simeon walks into the temple to worship.... He sees Mary and Joseph, and the infant Jesus... Moved by the Holy Spirit, Simeon takes up the Christ Child in his arms... and bursts out into song, a poem...v. ²⁸ *Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, You may now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen Your salvation, ³¹ which You have prepared in the sight of all nations: ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."*

That is quite the dedication blessing, right? Simeon, who has faithfully waited... who has been looking for the Messiah, says... "This is the One. I have seen it... My eyes have seen Your salvation... not ONLY for Israel, but for the whole world..." Simeon's words, his song, almost sound like the freedom songs sung by African American slaves in the 19th century... "At long last... My eyes have seen Your salvation! Free at last."

And, Jesus' parents are marveling at this... "Wow, yes. We'll take that! That's a life plan we can get behind! This glory thing, wow!" But Simeon is not yet done speaking... v. ³⁴ *Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, His mother: "This Child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵ so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."*

You can imagine, that now Mary and Joseph must be puzzled. Confused... their marveling a minute ago, now tempered by this heavy, heavy message. And, what we start to see, is that Luke is telling us this journey is not all sweetness and light.

This Christ's Child's life will be marked by suffering...The family is poor.... Jesus will be unnoticed in every way... And the way in which God will accomplish His purposes through the Messiah will not come via royal palaces and through influential channels... Salvation for both Jew and Gentile, will not come without great suffering... And Simeon looks at Mary and says, your heart will be shattered too. Suddenly, the Joy of Christmas seems to sit a little differently for us...

Just a few days ago, we were singing in this room, with our Christmas clothes... and candles raised high... about a Baby Infant, sleeping in heavenly peace.... And now, we talk about division... And a sword piercing the heart of Mary?

Christmas is in fact, NOT a sentimental time. It is a momentous time. A season for us to make sure that we are viewing the world, our lives, the year ahead, and Jesus Himself... rightly... For Who He truly is. 2. To view things rightly, means to make sure we view the life of Jesus with a theology of the cross-----what does that mean??

In many ways, it's the lens by which we see the world. Let me read you something from Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the Church - "A theologian of the cross, Luther says, looks at all things through suffering and the cross. It is also certainly true that in Christ God enters into our suffering and death. But in a theology of the cross it is soon apparent that we cannot ignore the fact that suffering comes about because we are at odds with God and are trying to rush headlong into some sort of cozy identification with Him."

You see, it is our nature, to want to look through, or past the cross... to the good stuff. To the glory. We want Jesus to be with us, Immanuel.... And fix our broken things and make life better for us. We would like our Messiah to be One Who comes from a little bit further up the social ladder than us. That might perhaps give us access to a better life, than the one we currently have... We fixate on the glory of heaven... we don't want to think about the realities of this world and our lives... and we easily look past the cross. What happens then when we come up against suffering and tragedy in our lives? Well... let me give you an example...

I know that many of you at some point have lived with a cancer diagnosis... or you have a close relative who has. A friend and mentor of mine, Todd Billings, is a theologian and professor at Western Seminary in Michigan. Over five years ago, he was diagnosed at 39 years old with terminal multiple myeloma... He has lived with the ups and downs of a disease that has ravaged his body, and will ultimately take his life. He's already outlived his initial prognosis. He has a wife and two young children...

He's written and spoken about his experience- including how he struggles with those who describe having cancer as a "battle," or a fight, or a war, that is to be WON. "I'm going to beat this!" He says, what happens is that our culture asks you to move past the reality of

your situation, to a day when the trouble is no more... When you'll win the fight... Instead of recognizing that yes... this is bad. This is awful... This is not what is supposed to be.

It's like reading the Psalms and only cherry-picking the praises, and not reading the majority of the Psalms that deal with lament and suffering. Billings says, when we do that, we're shaped to believe only positive emotions can be expressed before God in faith. The reality of the Christian life.... "Following Jesus..." He writes, "looks a lot more like humiliation and rejection than it does like triumph and glory."

Todd has talked about physical healing as well, and how he wrestles with what it means for someone with terminal cancer to pray to be healed. I want to preface this... it is good for us to pray for healing... But, we need to always evaluate the motivation of our prayers... With that said, consider what he says here... He wonders, "Is the prayer for healing, is our prayer for others to be healed, simply a quick-fix to move past this difficult part in life that Jesus might be calling us to follow Him through?"

He writes, "Sometimes we want to skip over the messy part of joining Christ in lament to get to our prayers for healing.... But praying for healing for someone with a cancer like this is a little like praying for healing for someone who has lost a limb. God can provide healing. But it will be a different order of healing. Until the final restoration in the resurrection, prayers of healing in circumstances like this need to be paired with prayers of ongoing lament, because nothing will turn back the clock.... Even if my cancer completely disappeared- and I had no detectable levels left- doctors would expect the cancer to return. Thus, even if I was miraculously and immediately cured, I would need to continue on maintenance chemotherapy for the rest of my life, along with cancer tests every three to six months. There would still be a deep loss.... Sometimes Christians assume that prayer for healing needs to take place on our timetable- that if it's really God who brings healing, it should be an immediate, "shock and awe" experience....

At times, I just appreciate the prayer and the charitable intentions behind it. But sometimes, similar to the experience of many people with a long-term disability, I get tired of the impatience of these prayers- an impatience that seems to diminish the material, embodied nature of my life as a creature, my life as one who has been united to the resurrected Christ but is still groaning for the new creation. ...In addition, sometimes these "quick fix" instincts seem to reflect what Luther calls "a theology of glory" rather than a "theology of the cross." "A theology of glory always leaves the will in control," rather than a theology of the cross in which we die and live in and through the crucified Lord."

Why am I mentioning all this? Because in this passage, we see the Messiah... The Messiah that Simeon sees... emptied, as a human Baby... and Who very obviously, from infancy... is living under the shadow and discipline of the cross. The question that comes to you and me this Christmas is, "Will we follow Him under the discipline of the cross?"

Are we willing to live that kind of life? To hear Simeon's words to Mary – Yes! Glory to God in the highest! The Lord has come... BUT, this will not be easy... in fact... it will cost you Mary... it will cost Him His body and His blood. Jesus will grow up, with that hanging over Him... preparing Him... And the point of all this for us, is that we live with the cross... with what Christ accomplished, hanging over us...

Yes, God is reconciling all things... And, yes, as a follower of Jesus, you and I will live in glory with Jesus for all eternity... but there is the **now** that we have to contend with, we have to address and live with. And, because of the cross, we now have the right of things... To face what 2020 brings... to live with uncertainty, to live with persecution... with diagnoses... even with death... How? Because the joy of Christmas comes not in sentimentality... not even in the family traditions that we love so dearly...
3. The joy of Christmas comes in moving from Advent to Advent...

Now, didn't we just finish Advent? What is this Advent to Advent? At the end of the passage we meet an elderly woman named Anna... A widow for many years... at least 84 years old... And what does she do with her life? Much like Simeon, she waits... She waits with hope—praying and fasting... for the God's redemption to come... And when she sees Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus... she sees it too... and praises God! How many years did Anna wait and pray!? How faithful was she to continue with a kind of resolute hope! And there, in her 80s... she sees it... and she begins to tell the world that God's redemption has come!

Now, for you and me... living on the cusp of 2020. Thousands of years after the birth of Christ... having just celebrated Advent... What are we waiting for now? What are you waiting for in 2020? What is consuming your mind about the prospects of the year ahead? What the Lord might have in store for you, for me? For our church? There is so much we could think of!

What the Christian is waiting for... is another Advent... Another coming... the 2nd coming of Christ. For His return... And we take our cues from Simeon and Anna,, We wait with an even greater hope than they had... Because we have seen the salvation of God through the cross of Christ, and His resurrection!

You and I are now invited into a life of waiting... A life of faithfulness. A life of godly patience... A life like Simeon and Anna, who go and worship... who trust not in themselves, or in the doing of good things, or the law... but who trust in the Messiah... who will come again... and bring His redemption...

Mary and Joseph cannot afford to bring a lamb for their purification ceremony... Simeon, takes the Baby Jesus into his arms... Simeon holds the Lamb of God... A Baby... the One who would become our purification... that all who follow Him would be made clean...

Following the Christ Child calls us to live under the discipline of the cross... With a very realistic view of things... We wait for a new Advent... not with sentimentality... and not with despair... And just like those who waited before Simeon and Anna, and those who have waited before us... Many may die without seeing it... But because of what Christ has done- all the days of our lives can echo Simeon's words: "for my eyes have seen your salvation."

Let's Pray.

