

The First Sunday after Christmas

29 December, Anno Domini 2024

St. Luke 2:22-40

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Certainly not the greeting that one would expect at the birth of your firstborn son. But what faithful Simeon foretold is absolutely true, as hard to hear as it may have been and still may be. From the very beginning the infant Jesus was hated and hunted. And on account of this sweet small Child, many would fall to their eternal destruction. This Stone, laid by God as the chief cornerstone of salvation, would be refused. His doctrine and life would fall upon them and crush them because they refused to receive it in faith.

Throughout Scripture the harsh reality of unbelief stands out like a sore thumb. Repeatedly, God Himself speaks of unbelief. “Many are called, but few are chose.” “Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. But narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.” It is very ugly business revealing the thoughts of man’s hearts. No one really wants to be honest about the wicked and selfish ideas that play out in their minds.

And you know what is there to be revealed. You know the thoughts of your own mind. You know the greed, the lust, and the hatred that lie just below the surface, eager to find their opportunity. Satan’s lie is to convince you that those things are actually good. If you just call them by another name - thriftiness, just looking,

righteous anger - then those things are perfectly fine and even pleasing to God. So we duck and dive and reframe and, of course, blame everyone else in a desperate attempt to convince ourselves that we are at least as good as other people, if not even a little better and so soothe our conscience and give ourselves a pass on the darkness within.

Look carefully, if you dare, O sinner. Take an honest look at your thoughts. What do the Ten Commandments reveal? Hopes for the failure and even the destruction of your enemies and those who hurt you? Fantasies about what you would finally be able to do if your family wasn't holding you back? A secret hope that the Christian faith might be proved false so you have no reason to deny yourself any of the desires of your flesh? There is so much that we try to even hide from ourselves. You are not smarter, better, more loving, wiser, or more honest than any one else.

Repent. You are just as guilty of the evil that you are quick to point out in your neighbor. Don't try to protect these thoughts. They need to be revealed. You need to be disturbed and repulsed by them so that you might confess them and be absolved of them so they don't kill you.

Allowing these thoughts to fester in your heart and mind will destroy you. They will eat away at you. King David knew this well. In Psalm 32, he acknowledged by the Holy Spirit that the sins of adultery and murder and lying that he had worked so hard to hide were consuming him from the inside out. "When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." In other words, when I tried hide my sins, make excuses for them,

justify them, turn a blind eye to them - then I wasted away into death. There was only one way for David to deal with his guilt, the same way you must - confess it to the God who has promised to cleanse you of all your sins, the God who raises the dead, the God who shed His Blood to make atonement for your sins. “I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not cover my iniquity; I said ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’” then, “you forgave the iniquity of my sin.” God forgives sins, all of them, even the darkest and most vile thoughts that pour out of men’s hearts. God forgives them through the Blood of Jesus. “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Peace comes from knowing God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Thus the Christ-child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, including your own. Those who despise mercy and trust in themselves that they are righteous will stumble over Christ in their arrogant pride and He will crush them because they would not receive His mercy. But by God’s great mercy, may it not be so among you. May you, by the power and strength of the Holy Spirit, allow the Law of God to cut deep into the recesses of your mind and expose the darkness that resides there. You do not need to fear what will be found because you have already been judged at the font and been declared righteous for the sake of the Blood of Christ. God doesn’t bring these to light to bring your salvation into question but to protect it. By Baptism your sins and evil thoughts are drowned and die with Christ so that in Him you may also be raised to eternal life. Every day, despising your pride, you confess your sin, you hear the absolution and the New Man is raised to new life. This new life is sustained by the promises it hears; it is sustained by the Body and Blood it receives as life-giving food.

Every true Christian will suffer with St. Mary whose own soul was pierced,

exposed by her own Child. And this Child, because He reveals what none want revealed, will be spoken against. So will you because the suffering He endured to cleanse you, He has you suffer in part. This isn't to cleanse you or punish you or so that you might work off your guilt. Christ has already done all those things in full. It is only to teach you and draw you to Himself. Disciples walk in the way of their teacher. You are called to suffer scorn and loss for the sake of the Gospel. You will have to endure mockery and hatred, the loss of friends and family and count all of it as nothing in comparison to the surpassing greatness of God's righteousness. Your Father appoints you crosses to teach you that He is the only thing that actually matters. That is not hyperbole. That is truth. He mercifully roots out what you've worked so hard to hide so that He can take it away from you before it kills you. The cross teaches that there is nowhere to go for help and deliverance other than Christ. Though this is a painful process, by it you will be saved, your sins will be blotted out and God will see them no more. You will confess and be absolved. You will kneel and be united to your Savior by His perfect and atoning Body and Blood. You will hear the voice of the Shepherd and be comforted by it. He will cause your Old Adam to stumble, but by He will also raise you to newness of life.

Depart in peace, for your own eyes have seen Jesus and the salvation He has prepared for you and for all sinners.

In the Name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and

your minds in Christ Jesus.