

Pastor Lew Upchurch
December 30, 2018

First Sunday Of Christmas
Luke 2:22-40

“Outside of Ourselves”

One of the great privileges I have as a pastor is taking Holy Communion to people who are either hospitalized or homebound. As you can imagine, most of the time these people have seen better days. Most are sick or recovering from operations or accidents. Many are facing times of trial that they have never faced before. Many are worn out and tired. But when I take out my little Communion kit, placing the wine in the chalice, and the bread on the plate, I always notice a mood change. It's not dramatic, or something that I can easily explain. But when I start the Communion liturgy, there is this sense of peace. I say the Words of Institution and we say the Lord's prayer together. I give the bread and the wine saying, the body of Christ for you; the blood of Christ shed for you. And no matter what is going on with the people present, there is this feeling that everything is going to be OK. They might not know all the details of how, and neither do I. But in that very moment when we begin Holy Communion, there is this assurance that our Lord is there in a tangible and concrete way coming as a source of strength in adversity, coming with his forgiveness, just as He promised. The same body born in Bethlehem; the same body crucified on Calvary's cross; the same body risen and glorified comes in the bread and wine of Holy Communion. Completely outside of anything the recipient has to offer, Christ Jesus, comes.

I remember this one man I visited regularly a couple of years ago. He was suffering from a terminal disease, and has since passed away. But each time I took him Communion, he would grab the wafer with both hands, carefully handling it as the body of Christ, until it finally reached his mouth. Then he would grab the little chalice and drink it dry. We would pray, and

before I left he would always say the same thing. “Pastor, don't worry about me,” he would say...“The Lord will let me depart in peace.” Isn't that amazing? The Lord who met him in Holy Communion time after time finally met him face to face the day he took his final breath.

I guess it should come as no surprise that when I remember this man and his great faith, I can't help but think about another man of great faith. And that man is Simeon, who we heard about in our Gospel reading from Luke, chapter 2. Simeon was a man filled with the Holy Spirit who was waiting for the coming of the promised Messiah. In fact, he was told by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. So on the day that Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple to offer the appropriate sacrifice, Simeon was there. And he was on a mission. Just try and imagine Simeon's reaction as spots the promised one, takes the baby in his arms, and boldly proclaims, **“Lord now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”** Simeon's confession must have been quite the scene. And this scene was not normal, I assure you. I mean Simeon snatched a baby right from his parents arms— in the temple—a baby he had never met—and declared that in that little boy, he saw the salvation of God. But he didn't stop there. Simeon then turned to Mary and got even more serious. “Behold,” he said. **“This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed.”** And Mary, **“a sword will pierce through your own soul also.”** In essence what Simeon is saying is that this little baby, this child, which of course Mary and Joseph already knew was the Son of God, will be the dividing line. People will either embrace Him or oppose Him. People will either be for Him or against Him.

And when you really think about it, this makes sense. Because when salvation is not some pie in the sky idea, or some dream people hope will someday come true, but is a real child, there will be division. People will always try to achieve hope and peace on their own, but real peace, real hope, real and eternal salvation, is actually found in a living and breathing baby. What Simeon is proclaiming, as he holds baby Jesus in his arms, is that redemption from sin, assurance, comfort, hope and peace, rests completely **outside of ourselves**. The only place any of those things can rest is in the child— the child born in Bethlehem. It's a bold proclamation... and a proclamation that was bound to cause problems.

It sure caused problems back in Jesus' day. To suggest to a Pharisee, for example, that salvation is not found in one's works or status, but found only in a baby, was nothing short of scandalous. It sure has caused problems throughout the centuries with wars and conflicts fought over just who Jesus really is. And it sure continues to cause problems today, even with many of us. I mean, when it comes to our Christian faith, we are really good at looking at *our* good intentions, or *our* feelings, or the whole "*I'm a pretty good person*" thing as enough to satisfy God, apart from what he did for us in Christ. And it doesn't stop there. We are also really good at making the Christ into whoever we want him to be. Christ Jesus the life coach. Christ Jesus the financial advisor. Christ Jesus the cheerleader, who doesn't care what we do in this life, as long as we're happy. We give Jesus all kinds of titles in order to fit him into our lives forgetting that most important title of Savior!

And since I'm going down this road, we are really good at taking it in the opposite direction too. Jesus doesn't really care about my life. Jesus might have died for the sins of the world, but He could never forgive me for what I've done.

But my friends, on this first Sunday of Christmas, after we have celebrated the most important birth the world will ever witness, I want you to think about something, and I want you to take it to heart. When everything is stripped away—when all of the schemes we come up with and all of the lies we tell about ourselves are revealed. When we try and convince ourselves that we're at the point that we can't take any more of this life because it seems too unfair, too hard, or too mundane. When we want to give up on God, because it sure seems He has given up on us, because the marriage is in trouble, the kids are out of control, the cancer is not going to go away...and about a thousand other things I could list. In the midst of it all, **there is our Lord**. When we have nowhere else to hide, nothing else of our own to hold on to—**there is Christ**. We want to fight it. We want to make it about us. But Jesus says stop...just stop. In me, you have everything that you need. Through faith in me, forgiveness is yours. Through faith in me, hope, peace, and love are your's. Life will still be hard, I can promise you that. You will still have doubts and fears. Many day's you'll forget, and still try and make things right on your own. I know that, he says. But when it comes to the most important thing, which is your redemption from sin and death, I've got this.

You know, that man I mentioned at the beginning of the service—the one who said when his time came, he would depart in peace? I thank God for him, because his faith had a tremendous impact on my life. And what I cherish most in those visits is that when we celebrated Holy Communion, he took anything he had to offer God out of it—except his sin— and simply allowed Christ Jesus to do what only Christ Jesus can do. And while you might not have been there to witness this, you have the very same opportunity he did each and every Sunday when the Lord invites you to his Holy meal.

So, what are you holding on to? How are you trying to control Jesus? What in your life are you so desperately trying to replace real hope and real peace with? Jesus invites you to come to his table and repent. Jesus invites you to come to his table and receive. Jesus invites you to come to Holy Communion with his assurance that he will meet you. It's completely outside of yourself, but Christ the Lord says **to you**, take and eat, this my body. Christ the Lord says to you, take and drink, this is my blood for the forgiveness of your sins. Take this true hope and true peace that only Christ can offer. Take it. And then join all of God's faithful people in saying, "**Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.**" In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. **Amen.**