

What Does Salvation Look Like?

Isaiah 63:7-9

Luke 2:21-40

“It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

The question in our postmodern minds after the packages have been opened, the relatives entertained, the story retold and our prayers said is a question that strangely coincides with the question this child’s birth posed to the first century world: what child *is* this and what does his birth portend? There are the facts, the details of a census, an inn, and shepherds in the field that have been handed on to us, Luke says, by those who were eyewitnesses. But Luke wants us to know the truth about this child, meaning he wants us to know so much more than mere facts: he wants *us* to see in his birth our salvation and be changed by the sight.

Of all the possible eyewitnesses after the fact, Luke invites us to look at the story of Christ’s birth through the cataract encrusted eyes of devout old Simeon, a man who had been looking all of his life for the consolation of Israel. Cataracts, I now know, blur the world around you until only shapes and shadows can be distinguished. Amid the ancient shadows cast by religion and culture, Simeon saw his salvation, saw in this child the shape of God's saving love for the sake of the whole world. What did he see?

When Mary and Joseph appeared at the door of the temple in Jerusalem, Simeon saw, in the first place, a child whose parents intended to bring him up according to Jewish law--or so it *appeared* at a glance. Five times Luke mentions the righteousness of Mary and Joseph in relation to the requirements of the law, which specified three ceremonies to follow the birth of a male child. The first was circumcision on the eighth day after the child’s birth. This was also the day when the child was to be given a name: "You shall call his name Jesus," said Gabriel to Mary, and so they did.

Forty days from the birth, another rite was to take place: the mother's purification. Women were considered unclean after giving birth and excluded from public worship. Mary's purification required the sacrifice of a lamb and a turtledove, says the Book of Leviticus, unless the parents were poor. Then a second dove or pigeon would do for the lamb. "And they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord," Luke records, "a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons." In telling us these things, he means to tell us so much more. No doubt he tips us off to the fact that Mary and Joseph were poor. But an ancient eye would also notice that the rites were wrong here--out of order. This was the *eighth* day since Jesus' birth, says Luke. The turtle doves had thirty-two more days to fly before they were to be ceremoniously sacrificed. Still, it was not the premature purification of Mary as much as it was the absence of another detail having to do with the second rite in Mosaic Law that must have clued Simeon in on the shape of God's saving love. What did he see?

What he saw was the absence of the rite of redemption, a rite reserved for the firstborn son. Early in Israel's life, the religious customs of owing the gods the first fruits of the harvest and even the first born of the flock easily transferred to Israel's worship of the One God. Not so with the sacrifice of the firstborn son, the sacrifice of children. (Apparently our worship of guns has not yet caused us to rethink this, but I will save that sermon for Epiphany and Herod's slaughter of the innocents.) When long ago God had passed over the firstborn sons of Israel in Egypt (the doorposts being marked with the blood of a lamb to signify the homes whose firstborn were not to be killed), the Egyptians' firstborn sons provided the substitute sacrifice. But as Israel ordered her own life in the wilderness, it became clear with this God that the sacrifice of a lamb was one thing while the sacrifice of a son was quite another. Therefore at some point, Israel devised an ingenious method of substitution for the firstborn son. They would consecrate a

Levite, from the caste of minor clerics, dedicate him to the temple's service, and thereby exempt the firstborn son from God's claim on his life.

A minor problem arose, however, as there were 273 fewer qualified Levites than firstborn males when this substitution was ratified. What to do? Well, as religious institutions have done throughout the ages, the elders decided money would do instead: five shekels per head would be a substitute for the substitute, giving the money "to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are in excess." Therefore Aaron and his sons netted 1,365 shekels and the firstborn were spared from death!

According to biblical scholars, Luke seems to be confused concerning these rites. He reports that Mary and Joseph arrive with Jesus at the temple to present him to the Lord, "(as it is written in the law of the Lord [Luke says in parentheses], 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord,')", and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.'"

But wait a minute! The birds are supposed to be for Mary's purification, not for the child's redemption from sacrifice. Did Luke simply confuse the Mosaic Law here as scholars seem to think? Or was something critical missing--five shekels, to be exact--which would have been a sign from the beginning that no substitution would be made for the sacrifice of this firstborn son, that this child was destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel?

I think missing shekels are at the heart of what old Simeon, righteous and devout and looking for the consolation of Israel, saw! "Guided by the Spirit," says Luke, "Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law," Simeon must have noticed that there was no payment for a sacrificial substitute. In other words, this was the One of whom Isaiah spoke, "But he was wounded for our

transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and by his stripes, we are healed.”

From the beginning Luke wants us to notice, if we have eyes to see, that in the end this child will be offered up as a sacrifice, God’s firstborn, upon the cross. But look even more closely: this sacrifice will not be a sacrifice for God, as all other sacrifices have been; it will be a sacrifice *by God* for our sakes, so that we might see the self-giving, self-emptying, sacrificial love that is our salvation in him. “In this the love of God *was made manifest* among us,” we heard on Christmas Eve, “that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins.” From the beginning, see the cost of such love, says Luke, not to us but to God, and live in his love.

But Simon saw more than what these ancient rites could reveal. In the second place, he saw a Savior who had been born to redeem the whole world. That is why, when Luke finally gets around to Jesus’ lineage in the third chapter, he does not stop with Abraham as Matthew does, but continues Jesus’ line all the way back to Adam. What did he see?

He saw a savior born into a world as lost as our own. “The Greek world,” writes Eduard Schweizer, “was filled with an almost unimaginable hope, which had centered on Augustus.... Inscriptions refer to him as ‘savior’ of the entire human race, who ‘fulfills and surpasses all prayers and transforms the world with his ‘good news.’” Moreover the Gentile religions of the time were looking for a savior. “Some found their savior in Isis, who undertook to emancipate them from the fatalistic dominion of the stars, others in Asclepius, the divine healer,”” says G. B. Caird. Here Luke is saying, by way of Simeon’s eyes, that salvation looks like none of these gods or rulers: the world’s salvation looks like a child born in Bethlehem. This is how God chooses to

act and enter human history. “For whatever reason,” wrote Maureen Dowd’s priest in her Christmas Day column, “certainly foreign to most of us, God has chosen to enter the world through us. We have stories of miraculous interventions, lightning-bolt moments, but far more often the God of unconditional love comes in human form, just as God did over 2000 years ago.” “It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.” The hopes of the whole world converge, Luke says, in this vulnerable, eight day old child who is “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” No one and no time left out!

Then Simeon sees one last thing, something you almost wish he had kept to himself. To Mary, he whispers, “This child is destined...to be a sign that will be opposed....” In effect, Luke whispers into our ears as well that the salvation we see in this child will create a crisis in our own lives. Either he is our salvation or he is not. Either God was in Christ, or this is the greatest lie ever told. One way or another, whatever we have seen in him and followed, or whatever we have seen in him and opposed, our lives will never again be the same.

“Jesus precipitates the centrally important movement of one’s life toward or away from God,” writes Fred Craddock of Simeon’s eyewitness. “As much as we may wish to join the name of Jesus only to the positive, satisfying and blessed in life, the inescapable fact is that anyone who turns on light creates shadows....It is the reality which causes many to take up the task of preaching with great hesitation,” Craddock goes on, “after all, who would casually become an accessory in the radical alteration of the lives of others. And, sad to say, this same deep realization may lie at the root of that preaching which avoids saying anything.”

What we forget about the particular kind of story told us by the Gospel writers is that they are telling us the story in order that we will be changed, that in the story’s telling our eyes

will see, our minds will be changed, our hearts opened and we will believe. What child *is* this to you and to me? What child will this be to us in the year ahead? Either we will turn toward him as those who have seen our salvation--have seen that our lives are meant to be lived in relation to God through him, or we will live our lives in the shadows and the shallows of life without him.

“The Word could not be made Flesh,” says W. H. Auden’s Simeon, “until men had reached a state of absolute contradiction between clarity and despair in which they would have no choice but either to accept absolutely or reject absolutely....Wherefore, having seen Him, not in some prophetic vision of what might be, but with the eyes of our own weakness as to what actually is, we are bold to say that we have seen our salvation.” Thanks be to God.