

CONTINUOUS CHRISTMAS

Our text for today is St. Luke's account of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. From Luke 2, verses 27 & 28:

When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God . . .

Dear Friends in Christ the Newborn King,

The Christmas Season can be a very busy time of the year for pastors. I remember a Christmas Season about 20 some years ago. I was the only pastor in a congregation that had rapidly grown to number 600 souls. And this had been an intense Season beginning already with Thanksgiving: two regular weekly Sunday services along with Bible Study, midweek Advent services, three children's Christmas service practices, then the Children's Christmas service, an early December wedding and the funeral of a teenage girl right before Christmas, and then the first ever Christmas Eve Candlelight Service . . . I was pretty well frazzled by the time Christmas morning came around.

The presents were all opened and I was anxiously eying the clock thinking about what I still needed to do before the start of the Christmas Day Festival Service, when one of my daughters, flushed with excitement and all aglow with her new gifts said, "Daddy, I wish every week was Christmas!"

Christmas every week? I was thankful Christmas only came once a year, and I was thinking to myself, "wouldn't it be great if Christmas only occurred every other year?" Christmas every week? Imagine that, Continuous Christmas. Our text today tells us about Christmas in the hearts of two believers, Simeon and Anna, a continuous Christmas.

When Jesus was forty days old, Mary and Joseph went to the Temple in Jerusalem to perform two Old Testament ceremonies, Mary's rite of purification and the sacrifice required for all firstborn sons. While they were in the Temple, a man named Simeon, led by the Holy Spirit, came up to them and asked to hold the baby Jesus. Then, to everyone's surprise Simeon broke out into a song of praise and thanks to God for this baby!

²⁹ *"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.*

³⁰ *For my eyes have seen your salvation . . .*

Simeon was overcome with joy because, with his own eyes, he was seeing God's salvation. This little baby Jesus in his arms was the long-awaited Savior, the bringer of salvation.

While this was happening, an elderly woman named Anna appeared. She spent most of her days on the temple grounds, fasting and praying. She, too, gave thanks to God for this little baby. Then she hurried off to tell anyone who would listen about this child.

Now just what was it that excited Simeon and Anna so much that they would create a scene in the Temple courts? Well, it's really quite simple. Simeon and Anna had waited their entire lives to meet the coming Messiah, the Savior. You could say that their entire lives had been one long Advent Season, preparing for the coming of Christ.

Simeon, we are told, was a devout man, a righteous man, a God-fearing man, but he was also somewhat of an oddity for his day. Simeon was one of the people who had read and understood Scripture correctly. He knew and believed the Old Testament promises concerning the Savior, the coming Messiah. Most of the people of this time had twisted the prophecies to fit their own hope for a coming political and military hero. Simeon knew better and so did Anna. They trusted in the promises of a spiritual hero who would come to conquer sin, death and Satan.

Because he was guided and instructed by the Holy Spirit, when Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms he knew this child was the fulfillment of God's promises. Everything was happening as it had been foretold. Simeon and Anna were seeing the Messiah first-hand. Their personal life-long seasons of Advent were now over. Christmas, the true essence of Christmas, had come to Simeon and Anna.

What is the true essence of Christmas? What is the one essential component that makes Christmas Christmas? Well, it's not the decorations and the parties. You can have Christmas without those. Christmas is not the Christmas trees and the presents. Neither of those are essential for a true celebration of Christmas. The true essence of Christmas is not even the children's services, or the hymns and carols. It's not even the Christmas Eve or Christmas Day worship services. For the first three hundred years of its existence, the early Christian Church didn't incorporate Christmas services into its church year at all. But they still had the true essence of Christmas.

The true essence of Christmas is giving thanks to God at the birth of our Savior. You can give thanks to God at the birth of our Savior without decorations or parties, without trees or presents, even without songs and hymns and special worship services. The true essence of Christmas, giving thanks to God at the birth of our Savior, is exactly what Simeon and Anna did. And now Christmas, the true essence of Christmas would be in their hearts forever . . . Continuous Christmas.

Here was God in human flesh. Here was forgiveness personified. Here was the peacemaker between God and mankind. Here was the end of all doubt and fear. Here was the beginning of real life. No wonder they were excited. Do you have that same sense of excitement, too, at the birthday of your Savior? Are you excited at all, or are you like many people, kind of “down” now that Christmas is over?

There’s a recognized syndrome, Post-Christmas Depression, which affects many people in our society. Many are depressed simply because Christmas, with all its smiles and lights and joy and laughter and gifts, is over. The real world is re-awakening - grouchy boss, irritable co-workers, rude clerks, disobedient children, cantankerous spouse. REALITY - what a step down from the happiness (contrived or not) of Christmas! Soon the children’s Christmas vacation will be over. Decorations will be coming down. Another Christmas has come and gone, and for most people, that means farewell to the joy of the season.

The reason for all of this is simple. Most people celebrate Christmas only like a birthday party. Birthdays come once a year. They’re a one day celebration. But there’s no real lasting significance to the average birthday. Year after year most people treat Christmas like a once-a-year festival. For a while the past is forgotten, the future is ignored, and people get lost in the gift-giving, the food and drink. And then it’s over. Oh, a few people are touched by the quaint old legend about a cuddly baby laid in a manger. But one week later, the thrill is gone. The baby is forgotten about, and the only interest is popping the cork on that bottle of champagne at the New Year’s Eve bash.

Most people today don’t even experience the true essence of Christmas, giving thanks to God at the birth of our Savior. Many people don’t even know the true essence of Christmas. They treat God and his Son with little more than harmless, sweet affection and passing interest at Christmas. Then when the season ends, they pack them away in the back of their minds just like the figures in the Nativity scene, not to be thought about for another 11 months.

But Christmas is not just the story of a sweet little baby in a stable who has no bearing on “real life.” Actually, when you get right down to it, Christmas is a matter of life and death. Even in the middle of all his joy, Simeon realized this all too clearly. Verses 34 & 35:

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."

This baby’s going to split the world, separating God’s people from all the rest. Israel itself would be divided over against Jesus. He would cause some to fall and some to rise. For some, Jesus would be a rock of offense over which they would stumble. For

others Jesus would be the “living stone” of salvation. Mary would herself witness his suffering on the cross and the sword of grief would pierce her soul.

What you do with Jesus, what you believe about Jesus is truly a matter of life and death. When it comes to Jesus Christ, no one can remain neutral. Either you believe in him or you don't. Either you believe the Gospel message or you don't believe it at all. It does no good to look at Jesus as merely a gifted teacher, a spiritual leader, a righteous prophet, a person who set a good example for us to follow.

The true essence of Christmas includes not only giving thanks to God at the birth of your Savior, but also recognizing your need for that Savior. It is essential that you see Jesus as the Savior you need whose life and death have won your eternal salvation. It is a matter of life and death. Jesus' death on the cross of Calvary and his resurrection on Easter will bring life for all who believe in him but will bring death for all who reject Jesus and his Word of Life. And what a tragedy this is! Jesus came, not to condemn the world but to save the world.

You and I will want to share the message of salvation through faith in Jesus and show that the essence of Christmas is in our hearts, it's continuous for the entire year. The newborn Christ is a living reality in your life every day of the year. Every day of the year you can give thanks to God for the birth of your Savior and recognize your need for him. Knowing, believing, loving and serving Jesus as Savior is a matter of life and death.

It's also a matter for life and a matter for death. Jesus is a matter for life. Every day of every year Jesus promises to be with you to comfort you, to protect you, to hear your prayers, to give you assurance that your sins are forgiven. And Jesus is a matter for death. Because of his death and resurrection you can be certain there is life after this life. And so, even in the valley of the shadow of death you need not fear.

“Daddy, I wish every week was Christmas!’ Continuous Christmas, continuously giving thanks for the birth of our Savior and recognizing our need for a Savior. Continuous Christmas in the heart. That's not such a bad idea after all.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father,
As we witness the waning glow of the Christmas Season, help us to pause today and reflect on the essential truth of the season. You sent your Son into this world to save us. Help us to remain grateful for this gift and keep this truth foremost in our lives today, tomorrow and throughout the coming year.
In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.