

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Luke 2:33-40

The Gauntlet

Let me tell you about the gauntlet. Oftentimes, you know you're in trouble before the doors even open. You can hear them inside. You can tell they're waiting for you. That's when you start to form a plan. You have to get through the gauntlet. But how? Then the doors open and you put a smile on your face and race through the oohs and aahs and outstretched arms. You shout "thank you," and "five months," and "two years," and "three years." If you are fortunate, it's all over in a few minutes and your companions aren't too covered in lipstick and Old Spice. What is this gauntlet? Tricia and I went through it again last week when we brought the kids to see my grandma in her retirement village and walked in through the lobby. And who can't appreciate this venerable appreciation for a child? Probably only a person who would say there is such a thing as an ugly baby.

Simeon spent every day of his golden years with arms open as wide as his heart, waiting for his baby to come. Anna stood in the Temple, a fixture as predictable as the walls around her to those who came often to this house of God. They waited and waited and waited for the coming of their child. Oh, how they longed to see Him. They could think of nothing else. Everyday they got up and went to wait, looking, praying, longing to see this Little One.

And today, that Child came, and Simeon wasted no time. Mary and Joseph probably got the big eyes Tricia and I get when we see a full lobby at the retirement home as Simeon dashed toward the Child full of excitement to see such a beautiful babe. Who knows if he asked to take the baby Jesus in his arms or if he just grabbed His infant Savior? This was what God had promised, this was what Simeon had waited for, and no one was going to keep him from this Jesus. Maybe he asked, "How old?" "About a month," they perhaps quipped as they tried to move along, but Simeon wasn't letting go. I mean, how often does one hold heaven, salvation, and fulfillment in one's hands? Who in their right mind would let go?

But, even if Mary and Joseph had been anxious to get moving, they got interested very soon as this man began to speak. First, he burst forth in song, as Pastor Peil so wonderfully presented it to us in our Advent Vespers. Then, after his song, when Jesus' mother and step-father were already awe-struck and taken aback, he said more. New mothers often hear many things about their children: how beautiful they are, how smart they are, how great they are going to grow up to be; but few mothers have heard words like Simeon spoke next: "*And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.'*"

Um, thank you, I guess, huh? One wonders what went through Mary's head. Sometimes in the back of church when I really get into the typical after service mantra of "Good to see you," "Good morning," "Have a nice week," "Thank you," and "Great to have you with us," I almost can't help but say a reply that doesn't fit with what the person said to me. It's not that I'm not listening—I am, really; it's that I am so used to saying the other things that they come out before I can speak up with an appropriate reply. Perhaps the same thing happened to Mary and Joseph. Think of the situation. This is not an angel speaking. This is not a priest in the Temple. This is an old man who came up and grabbed their kid out of their arms. And what does he say? Wow! This Child is appointed for a sign to be opposed; isn't that what every parent wants their baby to be? Is that a career listed on those aptitude tests they give students?

But Simeon knew what he was talking about. He wasn't just elderly; he truly was, to steal a word from a wiser man, venerable. He was a righteous and devout man, which means he was a believer in the Promise, *and the Holy Spirit was upon him to sing this song and preach this sermon, and it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.* Simeon was not some passer-by; he was put where he was for a reason, for this day, to praise and prophecy about this Child.

And don't his words ring true? Hasn't Christ caused the fall and rising of many? Hasn't He been a sign that is opposed? I don't doubt you agree venerable Simeon's words are true, but do you truly understand the extent to which they have been fulfilled, not out there, but in here? You too have opposed this sign, perhaps not openly, but nonetheless you have opposed it. For Christ is not a sign to be spoken against just to be spoken against, but so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed, and what does your heart say?

Last week we heard the angels sing, the shepherds preach, and Herod rage, all because of this one Child born in Bethlehem. Maybe your heart was warmed a bit, but was there room in the inn? Was the place Christ intended to live already occupied? Was your life swept clean that this Child might rest there, so that you might rest in Him alone? What present have you told more people about? The One wrapped in our flesh and laid in hay or the one wrapped in paper laid under the tree? Which present has changed your life more? Which present did you think would benefit your life the most? If there was room in the inn of your heart, how much room was there? Are you now ready to gladly trade all you are and have for Christ alone? Would you now joyfully prefer heaven above to earth below with its rusting and fading treasures? Have you doubted the truth about this Child and the promises made about Him? Do you enter this next year confident that God will provide and that not as much or not enough would be enough with Him? Has your life really changed much at all? Yes, our every doubt and every love that is loved more than Him has spoken against this Child and revealed the thoughts of our hearts. We have hardly been Simeon. We have hardly been Anna.

Once Joseph and Mary got done with Simeon, they weren't quite out of the clear. There was one more venerable saint waiting for them. She had been waiting every day. She had wanted nothing else than to meet this Child, because she knew who she was, and she knew who He was. And now she saw Him. And her life was changed, because her life centered around Him. She gushed with thanks to God and began to speak of this Child to all who were waiting for the redemption of Israel. Luke doesn't mention any mob coming to see Jesus. In fact, many probably just thought this eighty-four year old widow was off her rocker, but who cares? She had seen the Child, and whether or not others believed it, whether or not others received Him with the same joy, she was going to talk about Him, because faith knows no other choice but to confess, to praise, to proclaim. Her redemption was here, and as no one was going to keep Simeon from taking his salvation in his arms, no one was going to keep Anna from proclaiming her redemption.

And you have it better than they did. You don't wait for Christ in His temple. You are His temple through faith, weak though that faith may be. We have begun a new secular year this week. We began a new Church Year a month ago. Begin the new secular year as the Church begins the new Church Year, repenting and looking to Christ. He is here, waiting for you to take Him in your arms in the Supper. Anna waited eighty-four years. You don't even wait a minute before God's presence is proclaimed and commanded in the invocation, when the name of the Triune God who baptized you into this Child is sounded again as Christ dresses you again with His mercy. This Child who we hear and taste and see today is good, He is Goodness itself, and He is your salvation and your redemption. Grab Him. Marvel at Him. Refuse to let Him go, because who in His right mind would let go of heaven, salvation, and fulfillment?

Here God comes into His Temple, and two people run to meet Him—two people! How pathetic! Jesus was received by a gauntlet of two in the Temple, but He is not getting off so easy today. No, He won't leave covered in lipstick and Old Spice, but not for the reason you might think. He won't leave covered in lipstick and Old Spice, because we aren't letting Him leave, and He has promised He never will leave unless we tell Him, whether by our words or our actions. Make room in the inn today and welcome this Child. Take your salvation in your arms and confess, praise, and proclaim your redemption. Some people might not care as much as you do. Some might think you are off your rocker. But who cares? Faith has no other choice. Here He is. Run to Him, young or old, you venerable saints! Amen.