

Luke 2:22-35

The Songs of Christmas (Nunc Dimittis)

Introduction: For the last three weeks we have been looking at the Advent story from the viewpoint of song and praise. The first two chapters of Luke read like a musical... We have focused on the songs of praise that are given in response to the salvation that YHWH is bringing through the birth of Messiah. This week brings us to our fourth and final song. This song is a little different though because it really puts the declarations of Christmas that we've looked at the last few weeks into our court. What will we do, with what we've heard and seen concerning this child, how will we respond?

The Nunc Dimittis (also Song of Simeon or Canticum of Simeon) is a poem or song in the second chapter of Luke named after its first words in Latin, meaning 'Now you dismiss...(Luke 2:29–32), it is often used as the final song in Christian services.

According to the book of Luke, Simeon was a devout Jew who had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen God's Messiah. When Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem for the ceremony of consecration of the firstborn son, Simeon was there, and he took Jesus into his arms and uttered these words:

**“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.”**

**And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. 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.” - Luke 2:29-35**

Simeon's song is by far the most solemn and obscure. It is a song that has the greatest contrast. The first half of the song is so bright and wonderful, with a theme of world wide salvation. The second half though, is so dark, (it's in a minor key, maybe even with a minor third in there) with themes of division, rejection, and pain worse than death.

What we've seen so far:

- 1. Christmas means God is becoming King.**
- 2. Christmas means God is dealing with the darkness.**
- 3. Christmas means God is bringing peace on earth.**
- 4. This song shows us that: Christmas means Polarization.**

This seems a bit strange considering all the joyful songs and themes that we normally employ at Christmas time. Jesus birth does mean all the wonderful things that we've seen in the past weeks - but all these things come not easily but through hardship. Jesus brings light and love and peace to the world in the same way that a surgeon brings wholeness or soundness to a person that is sick, he does so by cutting out the diseased area, causing great pain and anguish, but this pain does in fact lead to peace...

1. The First Half - The Call and the Glory.

- a. The theme of this chorus is the offer of salvation for all: Jew and Gentile. A universal offer of salvation, many are called.
 - i. The parable of the wedding feast... Everything is ready, all is prepared...come!
 - ii. "This will be the true glory of Israel, to have been the bearer of the promise, the nation in and from whom the true world ruler would arise: A light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel." -NT Wright

2. The Second Half - The Grief and the Judgment.

- a. The theme is, though God is bringing salvation through this Child, He is also bringing judgment. People will be revealed as they really truly are in their hearts.. In fact, Jesus will bring about a great division among his people, and humanity. Many will be called to Salvation, but not many will respond.

- b. This child will be like a huge rock placed in everyone's path. Some will take their stand on him, and others will trip up over him (v. 34. see also 1 Peter 2:6-8)
 - i. This child will be like stage manager who pulls back the curtain on everyone's inmost thoughts (v. 35). Some will submit to that exposure and others will run from it.
 - ii. God's universal redemptive plan, which will be manifested by a suffering Messiah, (and will require his people to follow in his footsteps) will not be easy to believe for many people. But, how they respond will determine their spiritual destiny and eternity.
 - 1. C.S. Lewis said: "Jesus Christ produced three effects on people who met him— Hatred, Terror, and Adoration. There was no trace of people ever expressing mild approval."
 - 2. "The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused Him of being a bore — on the contrary; they thought Him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround Him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certifying Him "meek and mild," and recommended Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious ladies. To those who knew him, however, he in no way suggested a milk-and-water person; they objected to him as a dangerous firebrand." He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as "that fox"; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a "gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners"; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth and social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humor that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb. He was emphatically

not a dull man in His human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But He had “a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly,” and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.” - Dorothy Sayers

a. I think we, the Church in America, have forgotten the radical claims and teachings of Christ. Jesus truly did and does polarize people...he had a beauty that made us ugly so that we either ask him to make us beautiful and whole or we run away in hatred and fear.

c. What was so controversial about Jesus? What caused such a great division?

i. He consistently points out our desperate need for him

1. He takes the common notion of what's good enough for God and sets the bar so much higher that people realize they will never be good enough.
2. Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-.) Lust: Adultery of the heart; Hatred: Murder in the heart; loving your enemies; and finally being perfect as God in heaven is perfect)

ii. He then offers himself as the only possible solution to our need for a Savior.

1. The “I am” sayings in John’s gospel:
“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” “I am the light of the world.” “I am the good shepherd.” “Which of you convicts me of sin?”; Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.” “Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.’”

iii. Jesus reveals the hypocrite in all of us.

1. He takes our self righteousness and exposes it for what it is: pride and slavery to performance. He says it will not do; it will not measure up. He then invites us to find true righteousness, and rest from our self justification and performance, in him. He offers to give his perfect life for us, to fill us up, to take away our shame, sin and hypocrisy.

iv. He Demands Radical Allegiance.

1. **“Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. -Matthew 10:37-39**
2. **“Any one of you that does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple” - Luke 14:33**
3. He demands that he come before our need for future security, our family members and closest friends, our possessions, even our own desires and ambitions (see Lk 9:58-62; Lk 14:26-33; Mt 16:24; Mt 19:16-21)
4. Because of this many People -even respectable, religious, “good” people could not and cannot follow Christ. He’s too radical.
 - a. See you can’t pick and choose parts of Jesus, the real Jesus; it’s all or nothing....so that means you can’t pick parts of Christmas either. Either You receive God’s ultimate gift - His one of a kind son or you reject it.... Tim Keller says, “There has never been a gift offered that makes you swallow your pride to the depths that the gift of Jesus Christ requires you to do. Christmas means that we are so lost, so unable to save ourselves, that nothing less than the death of the Son of God himself could save us.”
 - b. Will we follow the true Christ of Christmas, and have the true peace and joy that he offers? Or will we settle for a skin deep, once a year version of peace and joy?

Conclusion: To many Christmas, Advent, Incarnation is the greatest news in the entire world, it is a reason to rejoice, to be merry, to celebrate, to give thanks. But it’s only because you have surrendered your life to Jesus; it’s only because you have received his ultimate gift that destroys all pride and self reliance, and have surrendered to his peace.

Here’s the amazing thing about God’s gift in the Christmas story - No matter who you are the story of Jesus can become your story too. He offers himself as the true king that your heart longs for. He offers himself to you

as the light to dispel your darkness. He offers himself to you as your peace - Peace with God, peace with yourself, peace with others. In becoming your story it will become your vocation, your whole life and identity.

As it becomes our vocation we will celebrate the coming of the Christ Child, what God has already done. And we will wait in expectation of the full coming of God's reign on earth and for the return of Christ, what God will yet do...

“But this waiting is not a passive waiting. It is an active waiting. As any expectant mother knows, this waiting also involves preparation, exercise, nutrition, care, prayer, work, and birth involves pain, blood, tears, joy, release. It is called labor for a reason. Likewise we are in a world pregnant with hope, and as we live in the expectation of the coming of God's kingdom on earth. As we wait, we also work, cry, pray, ache; we are the midwives of another world. -Common Prayer.

For all of Christmas's cause for celebration, there's an accompanying need to awaken our minds to the surrounding desperation. The world was, and remains in many ways, in darkness. Christmas is part of that glorious already/not-yet tension, where the finished song of redemption awaits the “Amen!” of restoration. We celebrate Christmas in a broken and fallen world, in broken and fallen churches full of broken and fallen people.

Let's not miss the true message of Christmas: God deserves all the glory, praise and cheers, because His Kingdom, has been, and is being brought to earth through the sacrificial work of his son, Jesus Christ. His kingdom is a subversive kingdom, the kingdom every heart truly longs for, a kingdom of righteousness and justice, Light and truth, peace and love. All are welcome through confession of sin and faith and trust, in Jesus Christ.....