**Bethel Christian Fellowship**

**Fair Lawn, NJ**

**“The Law of Moses And**

 **The Little People of Christmas”**

**Luke 2:21-38**

**January 5, 2025**

In The Christ of Christmas, James Montgomery Boice has left us with a wonderful collection of Christmas messages. They were the sermons that he preached at Tenth Presbyterian Church during the Christmas seasons stretching from 1969-1982. Over those many years, his goal was to look at this familiar story with “fresh eyes,” hoping to find something new and interesting for a congregation that had known this story from childhood.

That’s why I’ve always appreciated his perspective on what he calls “the little people of Christmas.” In the preface of his book, he writes, “There is very little weight given to the so-called important people of this world, like Caesar Augustus, Herod, the religious leaders of the day, or other leaders . . . In this story the emphasis is upon ‘little people’ like Joseph and Mary, the shepherds (who are not even named), Simeon, Anna, Zechariah, and Elizabeth. Even the wise men were not particularly important in terms of Jewish culture, for they were Gentiles who were often assumed to have no part in Israel’s blessings.”

His point is really quite simple. If the emphasis is upon the little people, then this brings the Christmas story down to us – for most of us are not important in the eyes of the world either. The story tells us that Jesus Christ is for people like you and me. “That’s very important,” he goes on to say, “because it means that when God does His work He is not limited to those whom the world considers important (1 Corinthians 1:26-28). He has chosen the weak to bring glory to Himself.”

Two of these “little people of Christmas” are in the spotlight as Luke concludes his story about the birth of Christ. Both are members of Israel’s believing remnant. Both anticipated the coming of Christ, and both prophesied the future of His ministry. Both would have been in Mary’s “baby book” because both made a remarkable impact on both Mary and Joseph. The first was Simeon, a devout Jew anxiously awaiting the arrival of the Messiah (2:25-35). The second was Anna, whom Luke describes as a prophetess (2:36-38). Like Simeon, she too anticipated the coming of the Messiah and the “*redemption of Jerusalem*” (v. 38).

As Luke tells this part of his story, he mentions the Law five times (vv. 22, 23, 24, 27, 39). The last is found in his summary statement, as he transitions from this episode to the next: “*When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth*” (v. 39). Clearly, there would be no story left to tell apart from the requirements of the Law. Without Moses, we’d never meet Simeon and Anna, two of the “Little People of Christmas.”

**A. The Requirements of the Law (2:21-24):** “*On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. When the time of their purification according to the law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: ‘a pair of doves or two young pigeons.*’” As we can see, Luke emphasizes that everything Joseph and Mary did was in keeping with the Law of Moses. In the words of one author, “Luke falls all over himself trying to make this point. He insists that in every respect Jesus is a very kosher Savior!” (Dr. Dale Ralph Davis, Luke 1-13). He mentions three significant facts:

*First*, the Law required that on the eighth day of life, a newborn male was to be circumcised (Gen. 17:11-12; Lev. 12:3). At this time the parents customarily announced the boy’s name. In verse 21, Luke tells us that’s the first thing Mary and Joseph did. Circumcision was the sign and seal of the covenant that God made with Abraham, which was the means by which Jesus became identified with the nation of Israel.

*Second,* the Law required the new mother to remain in seclusion no less than forty days after the birth of her son (the days of her purification from childbirth, Lev. 12:1-8). At the end of this time, the family was to present their firstborn son in the temple and consecrate him in recognition of the fact that He belonged to the Lord (Ex. 13:2-15; Num. 3:13; 8:17; 18:15-16). Luke tells us this is the next thing Joseph and Mary did (2:22-23). This would mean that they would leave Bethlehem and travel some 5-7 miles to Jerusalem.

Third, at this time the family was required to sacrifice a year-old lamb for a burnt offering (Lev. 12:6-7). If they could not afford a lamb, they could offer two doves or two young pigeons (Lev.12:8). Luke tells us that Joseph and Mary complied by bringing a pair of doves as an offering, indicating that they were poor (Luke 2:24). Only the firstborn male child was presented to the Lord (Ex. 13:2).

As is often pointed out, all this confirms what Paul says in Galatians 4:4; Christ was “*born under the law*,” subject to all the regulations of that law. It is also part of what is referred to as Christ’s *humiliation*. It highlights the truth that He left His home in glory and was born an Israelite, part of a despised people who had been oppressed by Babylon, Persia, Syria, and now Rome. But as Paul goes on to say, “*He was born under law to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons*” (Gal. 4:5).

**B. The Song and Prophecy of Simeon (2:25-35).** In God’s providence, Simeon enters the Temple court just at this time. He is a righteous and faithful member of the believing remnant, a man *saturated* with Spirit. The Holy Spirit “was upon him” (v. 25). The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah (v. 26). The Holy Spirit had miraculously moved him to go to the Temple on this particular day (v. 27). He was anxiously awaiting “*the consolation of Israel*” (v. 25), meaning, the *comfort* Messiah would bring to his people. (Cf. Isa. 40:1; 49:13; 51:3; 57:18; 61:2) When he saw the forty-day old infant, he took Him in his arms and began to sing his song of praise (v. 28).

This is the fifth and last of the “Christmas songs” preserved in Luke’s gospel (Elizabeth, 1:42-45; Mary, 1:46-56; Zechariah, 1:67-79; the angels, 2:13-14). In the opening stanza, Simeon celebrates the fulfillment of God’s promise to him personally: “*Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation*” (vv. 29-30). In the second stanza, he celebrates the provision of a savior for the entire world, both Jew and Gentile: “*Which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel*” (vv. 31-32).

In this last half of the hymn, Simeon is alluding to one of the great “Servant Songs” of Isaiah, in which Yahweh is speaking to His servant: “*It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth*” (Isa. 49:6).

It's interesting to read how Luke describes Mary and Joseph’s response: “*The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him*” (v. 33). Why the astonishment? Each of them had received a personal visit from an angel announcing this good news. They had just experienced Jesus’ miraculous conception, and His birth. They heard how the angels rejoiced that the glory of God had been revealed through the coming of His Son. So, why are they “marveling”? It’s because this is the first time it’s been revealed to them that God’s plan of salvation will extend to the Gentiles – “and this is done by a stranger” (I. Howard Marshall, Commentary on Luke).

In the second part of Simeon’s message, he prophesies about “the dark and costly side of God’s redemptive plan” (Davis). After he blessed them both, he said to Mary, His mother, “*This child is destined to cause the rising and falling of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own heart too*” (vv. 34-35). Here is a truth often overlooked in Luke’s account of the post-Christmas story: **(a)** the child will be both a blessing and curse to many in Israel, depending on how they respond to Him (“*the falling and rising of many*”); **(b)** He will be the object of enmity and hostility (“*a sign that will be spoken against*”); **(c)** He will expose what many unbelieving hearts are really thinking (“*so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed*”); **(d)** the hostility and enmity will pierce Mary’s heart as well: she will live to see her Son rejected and crucified (“*And a sword will pierce your own heart too*”).

So it is today. Jesus Christ splits and divides families. He separates professing Christians from genuine Christians in local church congregations and in Protestant denominations. He angers and offends people. Make no mistake about it – His followers share the same animosity He receives. There is trouble everywhere Jesus goes, and everywhere His name is lifted up. It is unavoidable. It just comes. No one ever shifts into neutral.

**C. The Testimony of Anna (vv. 36-38):** “*There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*”

Perhaps Anna is the least important of all “the little people of Christmas,” since she receives the least number of verses in Luke’s long account of Jesus’ birth. Yet perhaps she understood more about the full significance of the mission of Jesus Christ than any of the others who were part of the Christmas story. She understood that the infant Jesus was to become Israel’s promised Redeemer. We know that because she announced His birth to everyone in Jerusalem who, like herself, looked for that redemption.

Apparently, she was a permanent fixture of the Temple. As a “prophetess,” she received revelation directly from God. She was a widow, after only seven years of marriage. She was old; in view of the numbers Luke has given us, she was approximately one hundred five years old. Rather than remarry, as women in her world were strongly encouraged to do (1 Tim. 5:14), she devoted the remainder of her very long life to praying, fasting, and worshipping in the Temple. Most importantly, she anticipated the coming of Messiah and “the redemption of Jerusalem” – a figurative way of referring to Israel as a whole by referring to its capital (as in Isa. 52:9).

This is even more remarkable once we fully realize the meaning of the term, “redemption.” One of the best explanations comes from James M. Boice in The Christ of Christmas:

“. . . in biblical days it was used primarily for the act of freeing a slave. A slave could be set free if someone would pay the price necessary for his full redemption. In the various words that are used in the Bible for that type of redemption there is the suggestion that the person is ‘bought in the marketplace’ (*agorazõ*) where slaves were always sold, that he is ‘bought out of the marketplace’ (*exagorazõ*) never to be sold there again, and that he is ‘cut loose,’ or ‘set free’ (*luõ*). When the Bible uses the term in a spiritual sense it implies that although all have been sold under the slavery of sin and have been sold and resold as they have passed from one dealer in sin to another, Jesus Christ entered the marketplace in order to buy them back. He did so in order that the sinner might be purchased out of the marketplace forever.”

Elsewhere in the New Testament we learn that the price of our redemption was nothing less than Christ’s shed blood: “*For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect*” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

That is what Anna was waiting for! She recognized that the babe in Simeon’s arms would one day pay the price for the redemption of His people from the slave market of sin. Even more remarkable was the fact that she was ***one of many*** who looked for this redemption, for Luke adds that after she had seen Jesus, she “*spoke about the Child to all those who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem*” (v. 38).

How thankful we are for these “little people of Christmas.” They remind us that Christmas is not merely the story of the birth of a helpless babe in a manger, nor the wonder of the shepherds, nor the angelic chorus, nor the gifts of the wise men. The heart of the Christmas story lies in the fact that God sent the promised Redeemer into the world to set us free from the bondage of sin. It lies in the fact that “*God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*” (John 3:16).