



**Light a Candle of Peace
Group Curriculum
December 11, 2016
Sermon Passage: Luke 2:1-14
Curriculum Passage: Luke 2:25-32**

Introduction

Russell Moore is the president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. In my opinion, he is one of the most thoughtful and important voices in our nation today – particularly with helping believers bridge the sometimes-broad chasm between secular culture and their Christian values. On November 29th of this year, Dr. Moore wrote a rather thought-provoking blog entitled “The Problem with Our Holly Jolly Christmas Songs.” In his post, Dr. Moore begins to tell a story of an overheard, rather loud conversation in a bookstore, during which he heard one of the voices confessing to hating Christmas. As the conversation continued, the source for the hatred of Christmas was oddly tied to the music associated with the observance of Christmas. The accusation was that “Christmas has no narrative tension...like reading a book with no conflict.”

For the remainder of the blog, Dr. Moore explains how such an estimation of Christmas is not at all reflective of the biblical account of what happened at the birth of Christ or in the days immediately following. Poignantly, Dr. Moore warns of the danger of over-sentimentalizing Christmas, thereby robbing it of its depth:

By not speaking, where the Bible speaks, to the full range of human emotion – including loneliness, guilt, desolation, anger, fear, desperation – we only leave our people there, wondering why they just can't be “Christian” enough to smile or why they, like Charlie Brown, still feel unhappy when they stand to sing “Joy to the World.”

On occasion, when we speak of peace at Christmastime, we run the risk of robbing it of its depth because we unintentionally detach it from the reason it is so badly needed. As we consider the peace of Christmas this week, it is important to notice the desperation of the world that the peace of Christ addresses. When we do, we will discover a much more robust, life-giving understanding of what the peace of Christ is all about.

Biblical Background

Prior to the birth of Jesus, the Jewish people had undergone approximately 500 years of tumultuous identity shift. Beginning with their return from exile when the Babylonian kingdom gave way to Persian rule, God’s covenant people were in a constant state of flux. They had long prided themselves on being God’s chosen people living in God’s chosen land (the Promised Land in Canaan). With the exile, however, God’s people went into prolonged punishment and were forcefully removed from the land God gave them. When they emerged from exile and returned to Jerusalem, in waves led by Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Nehemiah, they found Jerusalem in ruins, their land overrun with Gentiles of various nationalities, and pervasive dilapidation.

While rebuilding the Temple under the guidance of Ezra and Zerubbabel and the walls of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah, many of the Hebrews returned to live in and around Jerusalem. Nevertheless, from the time of their return, the Hebrews always lived under the governance of foreign rulers. What is more, many Hebrews did not return to Jerusalem, remaining instead scattered throughout the world (these are called Diaspora Jews or Dispersion Jews). All of this was a threat to their identity as God's covenant people, as their customs, religious ceremonies, and ethnic solidarity waned.

In the following centuries, the Hebrews found themselves governed by multiple regimes. The Greeks under Alexander the Great ruled over them for a little over a decade until Alexander's death in 323 BC. This Hellenistic influence infused Greek culture and the primary use of the Greek language. In 198 BC the Seleucids reigned (Syria) over the Hebrews, during which time the practice of Judaism was sternly outlawed under penalty of death. The Maccabean period began in 164 BC, as a family of priests revolted against the Seleucids, only to eventually become corrupt themselves. Rome invaded in 63 BC, which was the harsh rule under which Jesus was born.

Why the history lesson? Because this is the culture Jesus was born into. When Christ came, he invaded a culture of Jews that had been in constant strife for five centuries. Peace was at a minimum. Identity was largely lost. Worship of God changed forms many times according to the foreign power that ruled at the time. So, when Luke writes of the coming of the Christ child in a manner that no ruler would have ever experienced, the impact on a Jewish culture that longed for political deliverance could not have been more unexpected. In the midst of their personal, spiritual, political, and cultural upheaval, however, some Jews found themselves looking in the face of Peace personified.

The Text

Luke describes Mary and Joseph as Jews of great piety. Their attention to the Jewish laws of cleansing following the birth of a child leads them to journey from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to present Him at the Temple, offer the required sacrifices, and have Him circumcised on the eighth day. However, in the midst of their adherence to Jewish law, something incredible happens.

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 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." (Luke 2:25-26)

Both with Simeon and with the later-mentioned prophetess, Anna (Luke 2:36-38), Luke presents notable witnesses that are of remarkable piety, demonstrate a sincere and deep-rooted anticipation of redemption, and respond to the Christ child with exuberant praise to God. Their understanding of the infant Jesus as central to God's redemptive plan in the world marks them as recipients of exceptional revelation through the Holy Spirit.

As far as the characterization of Simeon specifically, there are several aspects of Luke's description of Simeon that inform our understanding of his presence in Luke's Gospel. First,

Simeon is described as righteous and devout, which is an instrument Luke uses repeatedly to indicate the spiritual significance of coming events. He describes Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, in similar terms. As scholar Joel Green notes, “this [description] places Simeon in the company of those who act in unexpected or extraordinary ways, or whose testimony is required for a momentous turn in the narrative...his is a message of one who is working from within the historic purpose of Israel’s God.” In other words, Simeon’s pronouncement about the Christ child is a major indicator of His significance to come.

Second, describing Simeon as “waiting for the consolation of Israel” places Simeon within the ranks of the Jewish council. The idea of waiting in Luke’s usage here has the sense of looking forward toward a desired occurrence. There are heavy eschatological overtones. Simeon doesn’t have in mind the political and military restoration of Israel, as would have been the case for the vast majority of other Jews with regard to the coming Messiah. Rather, Simeon correctly grasps the weight of reconciling Israel to God by crushing Israel’s ultimate enemy.

Third, the Holy Spirit is mentioned twice in these verses as being upon Simeon. Mentions of the work of the Holy Spirit, prior to Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit filled the believers, should be understood as the Holy Spirit filling a person for a specific season to accomplish a specific task. In this case, the Holy Spirit was upon Simeon to empower him to identify the Christ child, confirm His significance, and proclaim it to Mary and Joseph.

“And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word...’”
(Luke 2:27-29)

Luke continues by clearly defining the defining the factors that led to Simeon meeting Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. The Spirit led Simeon to the temple, but his physical going to the temple was the result of his obedience to the Spirit’s leading. Similarly, Mary and Joseph were at the temple because of their obedience to the customs of the Mosaic Law. Their meeting, then, was a rendezvous between parties that placed great value on personal faithfulness to God and His commands.

Verse 29 marks the beginning of Simeon’s psalm of rejoicing. When the Holy Spirit opens his eyes to the realization that this child is the Christ that he has waited so long to see, Simeon erupts into praise of God’s gracious faithfulness. The focus of this first of three couplets that make up his song is peace. Given the political and spiritual climate of Jerusalem, peace was as greatly desired, as it was scarce. The Jewish leadership lived in constant tension with the ruling Roman authority. Various sects within Judaism warred against one another over points of legal interpretation. So for Simeon to proclaim that he was now able to die in peace juxtaposed the current reality of Jewish life with the far more glorious reality of what happens when God invades history. This becomes more obvious as Simeon continues.

*“...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.”
(Luke 2:30-32)*

The remainder of Simeon’s song explains why Simeon can depart in peace. Again, as Joel Green illustrates, the images are heavily connected to Isaiah’s vision of salvation, recorded in Isaiah 40-66 (especially 40:5; 42:6; 46:13; 49:6; 52:10; 56:1; and 60:1). The unmistakable tie to Isaiah’s prophecy connects Simeon’s exultation over the Christ child with the promise of a coming Suffering Servant in Isaiah. The strong undercurrent in Simeon’s song is that the long-awaited redemption from God has now begun with the appearance of the Christ. The promise has been made real.

Simeon’s eyes have beheld the salvation of God. In Luke’s usage, the way the word salvation is used here always refers to universal salvation, regardless of nationality, gender, race, or any other lesser category. Universal salvation should not be understood as meaning everyone will be saved. Rather, it means that no earthly distinction, classification, or categorization would be sufficient to exclude anyone from the offer of salvation through God’s chosen instrument, Jesus Christ. Most contextually here, given the upheaval in Jerusalem, Luke uses salvation as being “prepared in the presence of all peoples” in such a way as to include both Gentiles and Jews. The peace that is longed for, then, is found in unity in Christ. The differences that had put the Jews at opposition with every other people group would be done away with in Christ so that peace can reign.

The fact that this divine appointment occurs within the temple grounds (most likely the Court of Women, since Mary is present) adds to the significance of what is transpiring. As scholar Darrell Bock explains, “the locale of Simeon’s prophecy, the temple, is significant for Jewish readers, for this prophet is testifying to Jesus in the midst of the nation’s most sacred locale.” The temple was the place where the temporal and divine intersected, as man approached God through the priests He appointed, for the purpose of offering sacrifice that would address the sin that separated God and man. So, with Simeon’s recognition of the infant Christ, God once again met with man at the temple. The glorious difference in this encounter, however, was that instead of animals and grain, Jesus was the celebrated sacrifice. His peace would bring an end to not only the fragmentation of the world, but eternally restore the fellowship between God and His people.

In bringing peace, Jesus will serve Jews and Gentiles differently due to their standing relationship with God at the time of His birth. He will serve as light to the Gentiles because they would have had no comprehension of the blessing of relationship with Yahweh prior to Jesus’ coming. This would be their initial and ultimate revelation. For the Jews, however, Jesus will be their glory because, in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 15, through the nation of Abraham’s offspring, all the nations of the world will be blessed. Darrell Bock comments, “through Him they (Israel) will perform their service of ministry to the world. All eyes will be drawn to Israel through what her Messiah achieves. He is the magnet that makes her great. When the promises of God come, they come through the Promised One of Israel.”

Peace is appreciated most in the face of strife, conflict, disenfranchisement, or hostility. When Jesus came into the world, He came into a world torn asunder by such things. We know that the existence of such division and disunity is the result of the sin that has plagued the world since the days of Eden. As we celebrate the coming of Christ, we, like Simeon, rejoice and praise God for providing the way of peace that we could never provide for ourselves.

The Text in Life

There are multiple different ways that we observe the celebration of Christmas each year. There are favorite activities, desserts we only eat one time a year, family gatherings, songs of tremendously deep spiritual and emotional value, and a host of other things. As part of that celebration, we remember the peace that is associated with Christ and the season of His birth. However, if we stop at acknowledging peace without realizing the depth of its importance, we unintentionally rob ourselves of the depth of the Christmas season. As we consider the passage for this week and the encounter between the infant Jesus and Simeon, there are several points of application that can help make our Christmas celebration robust.

First, just as Jesus came to bring peace to a world that was broken with disunity, Christmas is a wonderful season in which to intentionally overcome the barriers that separate us from others. Jesus' peace required forgiveness that restored our fellowship with God. Similarly, our peace with others may very well depend on our forgiving others and seeking to restore broken relationships. We can model the character of Christ by seeking to be peacemakers where conflict and strife currently exist.

Second, understanding the context that Simeon lived in helps us understand that the peace of Christ is available to us in even the most difficult seasons. The tendency to define "peace" as being equivalent to tranquility, in which no problems, heartbreak, or struggles exist, is dangerous to our understanding of the peace of Christ. The peace of Christ comforts heartbreak and offers healing. The peace of Christ inspires the despondent and gives birth to hope. The peace of Christ unifies the scattered, segregated, and marginalized, offering community and transformation. The peace of Christ does not exist where life is easy and problems are kept at bay; it exists in those situations and transcends them with the power of God.

Third, faithfulness to God places us in a posture to experience peace. We see in our passage this week how crucial to the divine appointment between Simeon and the infant Jesus that faithfulness to God is. Simeon was obedient to the prompting of the Holy Spirit to be at the temple. Mary and Joseph were obedient to the customs of the Law to have Jesus presented at the temple on his eighth day of life. Likewise, if we desire to experience the fulfillment of the peace of Christ, striving to live in faithful obedience to God's direction in our lives is a crucial step in doing so. We can discover God's direction for living by studying His Word and applying its principles. That is not as easy as it sounds by any means, but striving to live in accordance with God's Word moves us toward experiencing the peace of Christ. Conversely, rejecting the clear teaching of Scripture wars against a pursuit of the peace of Christ. Faithfulness matters on a daily basis.

This Christmas, we will face challenges, frustrations, and life just not being like we thought it would be. This is a certainty because the brokenness of the world in which we live does not cease as we observe the Christmas holiday. These frustrations and hurts are just a part of living. However, because of the expectations we place on the wonder of the Christmas season, those hurts and frustrations seem to have more gravity during this time of year. When those moments come, the peace of Christ changes our perspective by reminding us that the faithfulness of God's promises to us were made supremely manifest with the birth of Christ we celebrate.

Discussion Questions

1. What does "peace" mean to you? What images or symbols do you associate with peace at Christmas time?
2. What particular area of your life would you most like to experience an increase in the peace of Christ currently? How do faithfulness and humility toward God currently resonate with your handling of that area?
3. Who do you know that has initiated the restoration of broken relationship with a friend or family member? How did they handle initiating reconciliation? Was the effort required to reconcile difficult? What happened?
4. How do you handle interacting in difficult or delicate situations in which the response of others can be volatile?
5. What are some misperceptions about what peace is that you have seen represented this Christmas season? Where do you think they went awry?
6. What is your favorite Christmas carol? What does it communicate about peace? Have you ever considered that before?