

Recognizing the Sign

1st Sun. after Christmas – 12/27/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Luke 2:22-40 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 34 [Simeon said to Jesus' parents, "**Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed**".

Introduction

- ⊗ Sometimes it's difficult to see something when it's right in front of your face.
 - One example is those 3-D hidden pictures? On first glance it only looks like just a bunch of dots or lines on a page that make no sense at all.
 - But then as you stare; as your eyes begin to water and you feel like you're going a bit cross-eyed, a picture begins to emerge as if there's a 3-D image of an elephant or whale or the face of Jesus right in front of you.
 - It's not that the image, changed. It was right there in front of you all the time. It just wasn't easy to recognize.
- ⊗ Far more difficult to recognize sometimes, is a sign of what God is doing right in front of you. Nothing's wrong with the sign. After all, God's the one who put it right there in front of you. It's just that you didn't recognize it for what it was.
- ⊗ Well, at this joyous time of the year, the sign that God has placed right in front of us; the sign that we need most is Immanuel, God with Us.
 - The problem is though, that by our own understanding and effort, we can't recognize what that sign means for us.
 - What's more, when many folks do see and hear it today, they don't even want it, they reject it outright.

I. The sign is seeing only through the Holy Spirit

- ⊗ But let's be honest with each other right up front. Being able to see what God is doing and how He fulfills His promises isn't an easy thing for us mere mortals. And that's actually part of His intention and design.
 - Holy Scripture teaches us this truth. Try as you and I might; whether you try to read between the lines or cross your eyes like looking at those pictures, you and I won't be able to discern God's plan and promises by our own effort.
 - It is only possible through the work and inspiration of God's Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned".
- ⊗ Simeon, the man in today's Gospel Reading, had received the promise that he would see the Christ before he died.
 - Now, I know it's easy to get caught up right there; to think, "Wow, God, why don't You give me that promise?" I mean, wouldn't it be great to see Jesus coming again just like Simeon saw Jesus there in the temple before he died?
 - Again don't let that personal desire get the best of you, because this was never intended to be a blanket kind of promise for all of God's people. This was a very specific promise to one individual at a very specific point in time.

- ✘ Only Simeon received the promise that he would see the Christ in the person of Jesus before he died. And of course God fulfilled His promise.
 - ➔ But the thing for you and me to take note of here today is that Simeon recognized the sign when God placed it before him. Verses 26-28, “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. 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...”.
- ✘ Before we get into what Simeon actually said, I want to make sure that you caught that there. The reason Simeon recognized this sign that God was fulfilling before his eyes in Jesus was because he “came in the Spirit”.
 - ➔ What does that actually mean? Since none of us can actually crawl directly into Simeon’s skin, we can’t fully describe what he experienced that day, but we do know that in some way, Simeon was led by and connected with the Holy Spirit in faith.
 - ➔ Verse 25 describes Simeon as “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel” with “the Holy Spirit...upon him”.
- ✘ So, can that same description be said about you? Do you have the Holy Spirit? As your pastor, I’m here to tell you, “Yes it can!”
 - ➔ Jesus promised in John 14:26 that He would send and give to you and me the gift of the Holy Spirit to dwell inside of us; to be our “Helper”. The Greek word is that He is our “Paraclete” or the One who is “called alongside of us” to walk with us each and every day.
 - ➔ When you were baptized, God gave you His Holy Spirit. And now, every time you hear the Word of Christ proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is actively working in your heart; opening your eyes and your ears to discern and understand what He has for you.
- ✘ For example, it’s at the Lord’s Table that the Holy Spirit assures you of the true presence of Christ’s body and blood right there in your hands and upon your lips, physically granting you His gift of forgiveness and eternal life.
 - ➔ And just as neither you or I have done anything worthy of us receiving that precious gift, so it was with Simeon and the way the Holy Spirit worked within him.
 - ➔ When verse 25 says that he “was righteous and devout” it is describing the result of the Holy Spirit’s work, not Simeon’s. Because of the Holy Spirit’s presence, Simeon’s was a life of listening, responding, and recognizing God’s works in and around him.
 - ➔ Simeon listened to God’s Word. In faith, he heard what the Holy Spirit revealed to him through the Scriptures, and he responded to the Holy Spirit as He moved Simeon to go to the temple that day.
 - ➔ And when he arrived, Simeon’s eyes and ears; his heart of faith was open to the Spirit’s lead so that he recognized what God was revealing there before him that day in worship.
- ✘ Now, here’s what Simeon said: “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” (vv. 29–30).
 - ➔ Did you notice the word “You or Your” as Simeon used it six times in just two verses. He has clearly perceived that it is God, the Holy Spirit, acting and working here to reveal God’s physical presence to Simeon; to open his eyes and heart to see and receive Jesus Christ in the flesh with the right attitude and devotion that this infant King of kings truly deserves.

→ You see, that's an important distinction. God's work and action always comes before our faith-filled response.

- ✘ And yes, God has revealed the same sign of His work and salvation that He revealed to Simeon to us; the sign of Jesus, through His Spirit who works faith in us too. And we; we respond with thanks and praise much as Simeon did, right?

II. Not everyone wants to see the sign

- ✘ Well, that's God's intent and desire. He certainly has given us all that we need to respond in faith by His power and Spirit.

→ But sometimes God's gracious action isn't received with such a positive response. Even as Simeon responded with amazing praise toward God; so much so that Mary and Joseph marveled at it, Simeon points out in verse 34 that the sign of Jesus and His salvation can and will be a stumbling block for many.

→ Beginning with verse 34, "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' " (vv. 34–35).

- ✘ St. Paul saw this later as well. In Romans 1:16 he said, "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek". That's the response God desires; the response we see in Paul and Simeon.

→ "But," Paul continued, "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, [while] to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ... For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:18, 22–24).

→ This is the way it has worked ever since the fall into sin. Even as the very same sign from God is right there in front of them, there will always be some who believe, and some who don't. This child whose birth we celebrate today as the Son of God in human flesh; He was directly received and directly rejected by those in the very same crowd.

- ✘ Some see God's sign – Jesus Christ in the flesh; Jesus Christ crucified; Jesus resurrected from the dead and they respond with disbelief, disgust, skepticism, and scoffing.

→ But to those same signs you and I respond in faith and devotion. We might never understand why some people have hang-ups and unbelief after hearing what God has done for them.

→ Maybe it's in the way we share the message. Maybe we're confusing Law and Gospel or presenting the Gospel truth in a way that isn't believable. Maybe we're not responding with the same conviction Simeon had so that, in us, people can't really tell if we even believe what we say for ourselves.

→ Maybe we're too concerned about things like how it will be received by those who are new to the faith so that we don't display an attitude of joy and confidence in Jesus as God's salvation-in-the-flesh like Simeon did when he sang his song.

→ But no matter the cause, the truth does not change: the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection of Jesus – these are still stumbling blocks for many people. In unbelief and sin they will not let go of themselves and their own desires so that Jesus can become the "light for revelation" and salvation for their souls.

- ✘ This fact should make us pause in repentance and take a look at our own sin so that we will see the great work that God has done for us in Jesus with our own eyes and realize that we can't save ourselves.
 - ➔ It's God's work; God's action in His Son Jesus that is the only power of salvation for Gentiles and Jews in Simeon's day just as it is today for you and me.
- ✘ Yes, the story and song of Simeon still has such great application today, more than 2000 years after Mary and Joseph walked into the temple and Simeon took Jesus up into his arms.
 - ➔ This is why I personally love the genius of Simeon's song, the Nunc Dimitus, being placed in the Liturgy immediately after we have held the body and blood of Jesus in our hands in Holy Communion.
 - ➔ Because it's easy to get caught up searching for signs and looking for God in our daily struggles; looking for Him to give us explicit instructions in what to do next; what job to take; what girl or guy to date and marry; and how we're going to get through the next month or week financially.
- ✘ It's so easy to allow these searches to cloud the eyes of our faith as we come here to worship each week; as we approach the altar for Communion so that we miss the very presence of Christ right here before our eyes; right here in our hands and upon our lips.
 - ➔ It's then that we miss the fact that God is giving us the very thing we are looking for; the assurance we need that He is with us in the flesh, providing for us daily; guiding us by His Spirit; leading us in His Word and strengthening us in faith to follow Him in word and deed.

Conclusion

- ✘ So rest in peace friends just as Simeon did; knowing that you have the Holy Spirit and His gift of salvation right in front of you.
 - ➔ The sign you need more than anything has already been given and fulfilled in Jesus as Immanuel, God with us – today and forever. Amen.