

THE NUNC DIMITTIS**LUKE 2:25-32**

Behind the screen is a work of art made by one of our longtime members, John Kirn. John is not able to be with us regularly due to his Parkinson's condition, but thank you again, John, for making this work of art for us. I wanted to show all of you the actual creation, but it would create a kind of a technological hardship with our livestream broadcast and the screen going up and down. But when the screen is up I hope you will take in John's creation. It depicts the manger or cradle of Jesus and behind it the cross. It brings together Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. It's a great introduction to my message today. You see, unless you acknowledge fully the cross of Christ, you can't know the full significance of the cradle of Christ. If you're not careful, you can miss out on the deepest meaning of Christmas. It's like the man who attended a worship service during the Christmas season and the speaker that day explained how the death of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection were the fulfillment of what happened on Christmas. The man who was visiting was displeased. He found the speaker after the service and said to him, "You know, when I come to church at Christmas, I don't want to hear about the death of Jesus. I want to hear about something glad and cheerful."

It's possible to so misunderstand and romanticize the Christmas story that it becomes little more than a pleasant fable featuring a big star, exotic wise men bearing gifts, and scruffy shepherds mingling with angels. Unless you appreciate what happened on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, you will never fully understand the significance of Christmas Day. "The Canticles of the Christ Child" is the title of this year's Advent messages. We have been reflecting together on four poems found in Luke 1 and 2 probably set to music and sung by the earliest Christians some 2000 years ago. Those four poems were eventually given Latin titles. We've considered the *Magnificat* – Latin for "magnify" and attributed to Jesus' mother, Mary and the *Benedictus* – Latin for "blessed" and assigned to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist. Last week we worked our way through the *Gloria in Excelsis* – meaning "glory in the highest" which was the proclamation of the angels to the shepherds on that first Christmas night.

Today, I want to consider with you the *Nunc Dimittis* which is a Latin phrase that can be translated literally as "now thou let depart." It's in reference to a statement in the poem about being ready to die, to depart, to be dismissed from this life. It's attributed to a man by the name of Simeon. Who was Simeon? Eight days after Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary brought him the temple in Jerusalem for the rite of circumcision. That's where they encountered Simeon who is mentioned only here in the Bible. He was described as a godly man filled with the Holy Spirit. God had revealed to Simeon that at some point in his life – and before he died - he would actually see with his own, physical two eyes the person through whom God would offer salvation to the entire world. When Simeon saw the baby Jesus, the Holy Spirit filled him with the understanding of what this Person would mean to the world. So, let's read it just now. The *Nunc Dimittis* isn't a long poem by any means, but its words reveal a great deal. I can see at least three important truths the emerge from Simeon's words. First...

THE MESSAGE OF SALVATION IS VERY WIDE.

If there is one clear, consistent message from the very front of the Bible to the back of it, it's this: Human beings need help! Educating people is great. Providing economic opportunity to one and all is good. Giving people access to adequate health care from cradle to grave is important. Teaching people to treat each other and themselves with respect and kindness is all well and good. But, after all is said and done, we all need massive amounts of help that only God can provide. But, odd as it may seem, we human beings make a habit of trying almost everything and everyone else before turning to God for His assistance. The Bible paints a stark but realistic picture of what happens if we ignore or refuse God's help. Without God, you are lost. Without God, you have no hope. Without God, your destiny is only despair. The Bible makes these alternatives and outcomes painfully clear for one gracious reason – to get you, me, and everyone else pointed toward the only One who can ever truly save or help us in all the ways we need to be helped. That's God Himself.

Observe again what Simeon said to God as he looked down on eight day old Jesus, “I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!” (Lk. 2:30-32 NLT) Simeon knew that through Jesus, God would provide salvation – help – not just to Jewish people, but also to everyone around the world as well. Yes, the nation of Israel could and should take justifiable pride in the fact God's salvation came through someone of their ethnicity. But this wonderful news is meant for everyone here and also for everyone not here, too. The good news about Jesus is just as true for Afghans as it for Americans, for Bulgarians just as much as Brazilians, for Canadians just as much as the Chinese. The message of salvation – God's help – is offered to every kind of person from every country, every nation, every culture, and every background that exists on the planet. It's for rich people and poor people, middle class folk and lower class ones, too. God's help is available for the educated and those who are illiterate. It's for men, women, boys, and girls. Not one is excluded and no one is left out.

Now, I'm not saying every person will respond to God's gracious offer to help or that everyone will be in Heaven for eternity. In fact, the Bible makes it clear many will never receive from Jesus the salvation He offers. Nevertheless, the offer is made and the message is proclaimed to every kind of person who has lived, is living, or will ever live. The message of salvation is very wide. For that very reason, Jesus told His first followers, “Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (Mt. 28:19 NLT) That command by Jesus needs to be obeyed by you and me just as much as by the original audience.

How many of you here today are glad the message of salvation is very wide? I know I am! There's no person who's beyond God's ability to love, forgive, and save by His grace. Not even you. Not even me. No one's just too far gone. And by implication, there's no place where the good news is inappropriate. In fact, the message about Jesus needs to be proclaimed to every person, in every family, in every culture, and to every nation the world over. A follower of Jesus who worked in the stables at a horse track of all places grasped this important truth. He got into a conversation with one of

the jockeys about all of us needing salvation through Jesus. The jockey objected, “This is no place to talk about religion. So, let’s put an end to that!” But the other man said, “Oh, no, that’s not the end of that at all. It’s only the beginning. After all, Christianity began in a stable. Jesus was born in a stable, and you – my friend – can be born again in one.” Good point!

Let’s do something together just now. Close your eyes for just a moment. I want you to picture in your mind three people you know who haven’t yet received salvation from Jesus. It might be a relative, a friend, or a neighbor. Can you see those three people in your mind’s eye? OK, go ahead and open your eyes now, but let me ask us a few questions. Do you pray for those people regularly? Are you taking any initiative to build a relationship with them? Are you asking God to give you the opportunity to have a spiritual conversation with them? No, I don’t want to lay a guilt trip on you, but I do want to remind you and me that God’s message is just as wide as His unlimited love. Let’s remember, He uses just ordinary people like us to communicate that message to those who haven’t received it yet. Spiritually lost people matter to Jesus. Jesus came as a baby for lost people. Your mission and mine revolves around reaching lost people for Jesus in some way, shape, or form. The message of salvation is very wide. But just because it’s wide and is offered to everyone, don’t assume it’s somehow shallow and superficial. Here’s a second truth that emerges from the *Nunc Dimittis*.

THE MEANING OF SALVATION IS VERY DEEP.

Simeon’s song is really big on hope. You need hope – real, solid, authentic hope that makes life livable and wonderful. What do you hope for? What do you long to see happen? What do you dream about either doing or having? If we were completely honest with each other today, we’d have to admit many of our hopes are pretty shallow. Most of the time our hopes revolve around getting the right job, buying the right house or car, maybe finding the right spouse, or planning for a healthy retirement. We all hope for life to go well for us: a comfortable lifestyle, great health for your family and yourself, and relatively few problems as we make our way through life.

When I compare the stuff I hope for with what Simeon hoped for, I feel ashamed frankly. We’re told in what we read today that Simeon was waiting for something called “the consolation of Israel.” What was that? Simeon was waiting patiently for God to break into the world. He longed to see God act and to be a part of it. Simeon ached to see the Kingdom of God come into its full expression and power. I think it’s likely Simeon was an old man. Have you noticed the older you get, the less many things of and in this world excite, motivate, or interest you? As we age, it’s easier to encounter that “been there, done that” feeling. Simeon wasn’t cynical or sour about life. He just wasn’t easily inspired. Having experienced much of what this life had to offer, he found himself dissatisfied with anything less and anyone else but God. Is God the One you long for, hope for, and wait for? Is knowing Him and loving Him more the greatest hope of your life? Why’s that important? Because what you hope for reveals a lot about who you are.

What's so great about a kind of hope that's built on God and in God? It enables you to persevere in life. You can accept the obvious fact that this side of Heaven you are and will always be a flawed, broken person but that doesn't drive you to despair. Your hope is in God not in yourself. You can also keep on living joyfully and productively even in the face of great sorrow, loss, and heartache. Why? Because whatever you've had to endure isn't the end of your story. God is at the end of your story and He's endless!

What's so great about a kind of hope that's built on God and in God? It enables you to live authentically. Your hope is built on the One who died and rose again for you and who now indwells you through the Holy Spirit. The Bible even puts it like this, "Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col. 1:27 NIV) Because of Jesus, everything in your past is forgiven. It no longer has to have power over you. Because of Jesus, your present is full of His love and grace. It's available every day. Because of Jesus, your future is secure but it's also going to be beyond your wildest imagination in a good way. Simeon waited many, many years to see what he saw that day in the temple in Jerusalem. What sustained him? What kept him going? Hope – hope built on God and in God.

Christmas doesn't change the fact life can be hard and unfair. All the happy Christmas movies, sparkly tinsel, endless parties, and department store carols can't hide the truth. People still die of COVID. Little kids still get cancer. People still lose their jobs. Loved ones still become seriously ill. Marriages still disintegrate. Addiction still destroys people and their families. Innocent people still get locked away into cycles of hunger, homelessness, and poverty. I'm sure everyone here today has experienced life's hardness and unfairness in some way. If you haven't yet, you will! And when those moments come – when you run right into life's hard, unfair experiences face first – it will test and reveal the content of your hope. When your hope is built in God and on God, you will still get hurt and – sometimes - hurt badly. But through it all, you also know God is going to have the last word. You don't know how, or when, or what God will do. But you know God will prevail in the end. Simeon knew that great fact when he looked into the face of the baby Jesus. So can you and I.

Christmas Eve 1971. A prisoner of war cell in Hanoi, North Vietnam. A single light bulb reveals a group of two dozen skinny, wretched looking men. Once, these same men had been superbly fit Air Force, Navy, and Marine pilots and navigators. But now several of them shriveled with fever. Others were too sick to stand. Some were permanently stooped from torture by their captors. Others limped on makeshift crutches. There had been Christmas Eve services in previous years – staged and orchestrated for propaganda purposes. This service, however, was the first time American POWs in the Vietnam War had been allowed to have their own service. The men were understandably nervous. At other worship services, guards had burst in, beat the men involved, and then locked them away in solitary confinement for 11 months in cells measuring only 3x5 feet. The Christmas Eve service in 1971 was simple enough: they recited the Lord's Prayer, sang a few Christmas carols, and heard the Christmas story read from a Bible. Some of the soldiers even managed to make some crude gifts. Others exchanged IOUs on bits of paper. But it was when they started singing "Silent Night" that the tears began to fall down those unshaven, unwashed faces. War couldn't, torture couldn't, imprisonment couldn't, and not even uncertainty about their future

couldn't dim their hope in the One who was born on a silent, holy night some 2000 years ago. The message of salvation is very wide. The meaning of salvation is very deep. But here's a final thought suggested by the *Nunc Dimittis*.

THE MEANS OF SALVATION IS VERY NARROW.

I want you to notice carefully what Simeon said as he held eight day old Jesus that day in the temple. "I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people." (Lk. 2:30-31 NLT) He doesn't say, "I have now seen one of the many ways people can receive your salvation, God" or "I have now seen one of several possible ways to find You, God." No, Simeon implied here what we know the Bible clearly teaches elsewhere. The means of salvation is very narrow. In other words, the way you and I get saved is as narrow as Jesus Himself. Jesus Himself said it, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me." (Jo. 14:6 NLT) Those who first became Jesus' followers never expanded that essential narrowness. The great Christian leader, Peter, put it like this, "There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12 NLT) He meant Jesus and Jesus alone.

We live in a culture that desperately wants to make the means of salvation very broad. We have confused the blessing of religious tolerance with the lie all religions are equally true. We regularly hear statements such as "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe in something... All religions believe pretty much the same thing... What matters is that you're a good person who tries your best." Most people in our culture – and sometimes even people who attend church – nod along in agreement. Yes, of course, we should be thankful we live in a country where people can practice whatever form of religious faith – or lack of faith – they choose. But that doesn't mean every object of faith is true or valid. Jesus made it very clear. You can't find God by following the Buddha. You can't find God by following the teachings of Mohammed. You can't find God by following Krishna. You can't find God by realizing your own essential divinity. You can't find God by trying hard to be a good, moral person. You find God exclusively by following Jesus and only Jesus.

Simeon nailed it. "I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people." (Lk. 2:30-31 NLT) Jesus alone is the means of your salvation and mine. He was placed in a cradle on Christmas Day so He could grow up and die on a cross on Good Friday and be raised to life on Easter Day. And when He rose from the dead, He purchased a place in Heaven for every person who will put his or her trust in Him alone. All that God is – all that He offers you – comes through one very narrow means: Jesus.

The year was 1937. For the first time, John Griffith brought his eight year old son, Greg, to work with him to see what Daddy did. The boy was wide-eyed with excitement to see how the huge bridge over the Mississippi River went up and down when order to do so by his mighty father. At noon, John Griffith put the bridge up so that the big boats on the river could go through unimpeded. No trains were due for a while. He and Greg

walked out to an observation deck, sat down, and begin enjoying a sack lunch together. John told stories while his son listened with rapt attention.

Then, suddenly, a train whistle sounded. John Griffith looked at his watch. It was time for the 107, the Memphis Express with some 400 passengers, to rush across the bridge in just a few minutes. He would have to hurry but he had the time. He told Greg to stay where he was. Then he hurried back to the control room, went in, and put his hand on the huge lever that controlled the bridge. He looked up and down the river to see if any boats were coming and then to see if any were directly under the bridge. It was then that John saw something that made his blood freeze. His son had tried to follow him to the control room, but had somehow fallen into the huge box that housed the monstrous gears that operated the massive drawbridge. The boy's left leg was caught between the two main gears. John Griffith knew that if he pushed that lever down, his son would be crushed by the gears. Panic filled his heart as tears filled his eyes. What could he do?

He saw a rope there in the control room. Was there time to use it to rescue his son? But he knew immediately he would never make it. The train whistle sounded again. Now he could hear the clicking of the train's wheels on the track. There were 400 people on the Memphis Express. But Greg was his son – his only son. John Griffith knew what he had to do in that awful moment. He buried his head in his hands and pushed that gear forward and down. The great bridge slowly lowered into place just as the train roared across.

John Griffith lifted his tear smeared face and looked straight into the windows of that train as it flashed by. He saw men reading the paper, a conductor in uniform looking at his pocket watch, ladies sipping tea, and children pushing long spoons through scoops of ice cream. But nobody looked into that great gear box below the bridge. Filled with agony, John beat against the window of the control room, "What's wrong with you people? Don't you care? I gave my son; I sacrificed my son for you!" But nobody looked. Nobody heard. Nobody knew. The train disappeared on the other side of the river and was gone.

I wonder if people who believe there are many ways to Heaven realize what an insult and offense that belief must be to God. Do they think if there had been any other way for you and me to have an eternal relationship with God that He would have allowed His one and only Son to be crushed to death for your sins and mine? "Rick, that's kind of an ugly story to hear about just a few days before Christmas." Is it? The Triune God saw our predicament. He could have let all of us just go to Hell which is what we deserve. Instead, He chose to take on our humanity in His Son and to be crushed by our sin and our rebellion. And because He died and rose again, you can be forgiven, your relationship with Him restored, and you can be assured of an eternal home. You will never understand the cradle if you don't see – behind it, above it, beneath, and around it – the cross and the empty tomb. No one has been saved, is being saved, or ever will be saved by anyone other than Jesus. The message of salvation? Very wide. The meaning of salvation? Very deep. The means of salvation? Very narrow.