

Luke 2:25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. ²⁷ Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
 according to your word;
³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,
³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles
 and for glory to your people Israel."

Luke 2:33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵ so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

I was so happy on Christmas Eve to hear Pat Amor play a beautiful piano arrangement of "I Wonder as I Wander," which is one of my Christmas favorites. We might recall some of the words. **Why did Jesus come?** Well, to die *for poor ornery people like you and like I*. We cannot forget this, as much as it might be comfortable to turn the whole thing into a holiday of some kind.

Many years ago I heard a veteran pastor make an interesting comment about Christmas. He basically said "It's great that so many people want Christmas every year. But it would be even greater if most of them wanted anything at all to do with Jesus." He was sad that in spite of all the love for Christmas, there was not an equal love for Christ. I think we could agree on that. I

share that same concern, and have for many many years. I admit that for a very long time I have not been a big fan of how Christmas is done in our culture. I don't mean to rock any boats or tip any canoes here but I still cannot reconcile in my mind and heart how spending lots and lots of money on people who usually already have most everything they need, how all that spending somehow honors Jesus. I think there are other things we could do that would make him far more happy. More about that in a moment.

Let me mention one other final bit of crazy news that I heard the other day. Starting yesterday, December 26th, lots of people headed back out into the madness in order to return gifts that they did not want. (No thanks.) In case you did not know it, there is a good chance that what you return to the store will end up in a landfill sometime soon. According to a story on CNN about 5 billion pounds of Christmas gifts will wind up basically buried at the dump. It takes too much time to process them back into the system of a store, and lots of them have been opened. So the easiest and quickest thing is just for the store to throw them out. So, not only do we spend all this money on things that many people do not need, but then for the stuff we decided we didn't like, it gets returned and sent to the dump. Merry Christmas? Maybe we can fix some of this. But we have to be honest about the problem.

The famous author C.S. Lewis was once asked about Christianity. Someone asked him if Christianity would bring them comfort and peace. His response was simple: *“If you*

wish to be comforted, a bottle of Port will do. But if you want comfort, Christianity will not do.” On top of the words of C.S. Lewis, we have our reading from Luke this morning which we will deal with in a moment. But first, let’s examine this thought of Christmas and the question of what people actually want.

I heard a special little poem 34 years ago when I was serving my first congregation. I was at a clergy gathering and a veteran Pastor got up and read these words from Rev. Wilbur Rees:

I would like \$3 worth of God please; not enough to explode my soul, and disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don’t want enough of God to make me care about a black man, or pick beets with a migrant worker. I want ecstasy, not transformation. I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the Eternal in a paper sack. I would like \$3 worth of God, please.

What would happen if we actually *wanted* Jesus? Things could get complicated. We might have to let go of grudges that we have held and nurtured for decades. We might have to actually change in all sorts of ways! The story we hear on Christmas Eve of Jesus being born in a lowly, homeless way emphasizes the willingness of God to go to great lengths to reach down to us. God, we are told, goes to great and extreme lengths for us. Will we go to great and extreme lengths for God? Or do we just want \$3 worth? Do we just want enough to make us feel

good for a while? Or are we willing to take a chance and go farther? Did we get what we wanted? Were we clear about what we wanted?

In our reading for this morning we meet Simeon, a holy man who has been waiting to see a sign of God's deliverance of his people Israel. He sees baby Jesus and he rejoices. But then he finishes things off with a warning: ***“This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”*** Merry Christmas once again?

My goodness, you take your baby to the Temple to be named, and this is what you get?!? Poor Mary! Jesus will not just be a gift that calms us down, makes us happy, and gives us everything we want! We cannot just ask for \$3 worth of Jesus. He will force people to choose sides: Our side, or God's side! Jesus comes to proclaim that God's rule, God's reign will come to replace all the crazy human governments of the earth, all the empires that come and go, all the ways of the world that we accept as just the way it is. Jesus forces us to choose sides. And if we really want to follow him, it most surely will force us to choose if we will be willing to be remade from the inside out, beginning with our hearts.

Did you get what you wanted for Christmas? Do we want Christmas, or do we really want to go for it, and actually want Jesus? Do we only want \$3 worth of God? Just enough to

comfort us, but not enough to change us? Do we want the warmth of the womb, but not a new birth?

Let's remember the Jesus who tells us to love each other, no matter what, to pray for those who are against us, to actually love our enemies. Let's remember the Jesus who tells us how we need to learn to forgive others just as God forgives us. Let's remember the Jesus who tells us that we will have to choose sides, and how that will not always be pleasant, and that many will not choose him, regardless of how much they love a good holiday! Let's remember the Jesus who will grow up to tell his followers that they must pick up their crosses and follow him, that they will need to deny themselves. And let's be honest. Just wanting \$3 of this is not going to get us very far. May God help us to want much more, so that we might have the best gift ever, something far greater than a holiday.

P. S. Let me throw out an idea about how to spiritually improve Christmas: If we as people of the Church would make a commitment, in Jesus's name, to spend as much on strangers in need as we do on our own families, I believe that THAT would get peoples' attention, and they would want to be a part of this thing we call Christianity! We could do the work, and figure out where to help and how. Please let's remember that there is so much loss and concern right now. We could really love others at Christmas. What a gift that would be! AMEN.