

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear fellow worshippers of the newborn King,

Merry Christmas! We have heard the glorious news of great joy – Christ our Savior is born! He has saved his people from their sins! We remembered and rejoiced about what God did for us when he sent Jesus to this earth as a baby in a manger. He sent the one who would conquer sin, death and the power of the devil. Today, in our sermon, we want to look at this world-changing event from a different perspective. We know what God did. Now the question is, how will *we* receive the Christ child?

There are various ways people receive the Christ child. Some receive him with outright unbelief. They deny, hate and reject him. Others receive him with self-righteousness. Christ is looked to as a wonderful example to follow, but nothing more. He is considered by many to be the one who demonstrates how we can work our own way to heaven. Others receive the Christ child with indifference. Their attitude is: “Christ was born? So what.” Others receive Christ with ignorance. “Christ was born. What does this mean for me?” Finally, there are those who receive the Christ child with faith and love because they know who he is and what he did for them.

So the question is, dear friends, how will *you* receive the Christ child? Let’s read today’s sermon text. In this text Simeon foretold the different ways the Christ child would be received by people. Simeon foretold that Jesus is **the Child who divides the world**.

Our sermon text is recorded in St. Luke’s Gospel, chapter 2, verses 33 – 40.

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising 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 soul too.” 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 worshiped 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. When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him. *(Lk 2:33-40)*

Our text takes place 40 days after the birth of Jesus. Mary and Joseph had taken the baby Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem (which was approximately 6 miles from Bethlehem). According to God’s Old Testament law, two matters had to be attended to there – Mary’s purification and the presentation of Jesus to the Lord as a firstborn son. Before their arrival, the Holy Spirit had directed Simeon to go to the temple. We know little about Simeon except that he was a devout believer who was eagerly waiting for God to send the long-promised Messiah. Traditionally, Simeon has been portrayed as a very old man since he was told he would not die before seeing the Savior, and because in his song he says he can now depart in peace. But it’s also possible he was younger.

Our text begins halfway through this account about Simeon. We read, “The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him.” What had Simeon said about him? He had said

that their baby was God's salvation, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel. Truly these were amazing things! Simeon was emphasizing what God was doing for man. In fact, everything Mary and Joseph had heard about Jesus up to this point was concerning what God would do for man through this baby. And that's what we've been talking about so far in our Christmas services. Through this baby, the sins of the world are forgiven. This baby was and would remain absolutely holy in thoughts, word and actions. He would do miracles. Teach the people. And he would suffer and die on a cross for your sins and mine. These are the objective facts of what Jesus did and accomplished. And certainly they must remain the primary focus of our teaching and attention.

As our text continues, however, Simeon switches the emphasis. As he continues to prophesy about the baby, he now talks about human response to God's gift. For the first time, Jesus' parents learn about how people would receive the Christ child.

Simeon said, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against." It must have seemed strange to Jesus' parents to hear that their son, who brought God's salvation to mankind, would cause many to fall. Perhaps to us too these words are hard to understand. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. How is it that he causes some to fall? Actually, this truth had already been foretold by the prophet Isaiah long before Jesus was born. He wrote: "*He will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall for both houses of Israel. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured.*" (Is 8:14-15).

It's strange but true – for some Christ Jesus is a stumbling stone. For others he is the cornerstone of their life. Peter expressed this thought in his first letter. "*Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, "The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone," and, "A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall." They stumble because they disobey the message—which is also what they were destined for*" (1 Pe 2:7-8). Many hear Jesus and reject him. As a result, they will fall. They will spend eternity separated from God because they rejected his Son. We saw people receive Jesus in this way while he still lived on earth. He was rejected by the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, the teachers of the law, by the people in Jesus' home town of Nazareth. For all of these people, Jesus was a stumbling stone. By their unbelief, their encounter with Jesus caused them to fall.

Simeon makes it clear that the opposition to Jesus would not be merely passive. People wouldn't simply fail to believe, and thus be condemned. But he said they would also actively oppose Jesus – he was "*a sign that will be spoken against.*" Again, Simeon's prophecy was accurate. Jesus' enemies continuously spoke against him and tried to turn the people against him. In his short ministry, Jesus enemies called him a liar, deceiver, glutton, drunkard, sinner, friend of sinners, blasphemer, law breaker, and demon possessed! This active opposition didn't end after Christ's ascension. Read about Paul's missionary journeys in the book of Acts and you'll see how the Jews actually followed him in his journeys, stirring up trouble and dissension wherever he went, and trying to discredit the Gospel message Paul proclaimed.

The Apostle Paul explains why Christ causes many to fall. "*We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*" (1 Co 1:23). That God would send and punish his one and only Son to take away the sins of the world sounds like utter foolishness to unbelievers.

To this day, people reject Christ and his work and actively oppose his work of salvation. Opposition to Christ has produced strange allies. For example, read what Muslims, atheists, Jews

and to some extent Jehovah's witnesses write about Christ. If you don't know the source of the opposition, it will be difficult for you to tell which of these four groups is writing. They speak with one voice as they try to prove that Jesus is not true God and he didn't accomplish salvation for mankind. This opposition was foretold by Simeon. Already at his birth, Simeon saw that he was **the child who divides the world.**

But let us not boast that we are not like them. *"So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!"* (1 Co 10:12). The church in Galatia listened to the Gospel and believed. But then people started to teach that faith in Christ wasn't enough for salvation. They taught that it was also necessary to do works of the law to be saved. They stopped putting sole trust in Christ, and felt they must at least somewhat work out their own salvation. Dear friends, *where are you putting your trust?* Do you ever feel proud that you're a worthy Christian who goes to church, attends Bible class, and prays regularly? Have you ever compared yourselves to others, thinking, "Look at how he behaves! Look at his lack of faith! Where is his love?" Deep down inside, is it possible you have thought, "If only other Christians would be more like me!"

Dear brothers and sisters, if you've caught yourself thinking such thoughts (and I'm sure you have), you are in danger of stumbling. Without even realizing it, you have begun to think that you don't really need a Savior from sin as much as other people do. You are in danger of being one of those who fall.

There is only one solution when we fail to understand the severity of our sins – God's law. Each and every one of us is sinful. Stop thinking about other people's sins. Think about what *you* have done – today, yesterday, last week. By your sins, you have grieved the Holy Spirit. By your sins, you are offending the almighty God. By your sins, you are harming Christ's body, the church. Because of your sins, you deserve only God's anger and his punishment – you deserve separation from God for all eternity in the depths of hell. Repent of your sins, dear Christians, and approach God on your knees and with your head bowed low.

The good news is that Jesus also came for the *"rising up of many"* (34). James wrote in his epistle, *"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up"* (James 4:10). Jesus said the same: *"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"* (Lk 18:14). In order to exalt the humble, Jesus became man, born of the virgin Mary. He lived under the law of God and obliged himself to fulfill every last one of God's demands. He was perfectly obedient! *"And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!"* (Php 2:8). On that cross, Jesus *"gave his life as a ransom for many"* (Matt. 20:28.) Jesus suffered greatly for our sins.

Simeon foretold the grief Mary would experience as she watched her Son suffer for the sins of the world. We share Mary's grief that our sins necessitated the suffering and death of the Savior we love dearly. But we rejoice at the result of his work! Jesus paid for every last one of our sins, and gave us total peace with God. Through faith in Christ, we are exalted! We are holy and perfect in God's eyes. We are creatures who are prepared for heaven. *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich"* (2 Co 8:9). **The Lord Jesus, who is a stumbling stone for many, raises up those who humbly seek forgiveness which he alone gives.**

Just as the Bible has many examples of those who fell because of Jesus, it also gives many examples of those who were "raised up". One such example is right in our text. Anna, a very old prophetess spent most of her time in the temple. She knew God's Word well, and was

anticipating the fulfillment of God's promise to send the Messiah – the Savior. She apparently heard Simeon's prophecy about the baby Jesus, and she immediately praised and thanked God. She couldn't keep quiet about this good news. She "*spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.*" There were other believers in Jerusalem who were also looking forward to God fulfilling his promise to send the Messiah. They knew he would ransom God's people from sin, death and the devil. Anna announced to all these believers that God had kept his promise, and that the Savior had come! She was just one of many who heard of Christ and believed.

And so, dear friends, **how will you receive the Christ child?** God has revealed to us the greatness of our sin, and its serious consequences. And God has graciously revealed to us the person and work of his Son. In Jesus we have unconditional and complete forgiveness! Receive him as Simeon and Anna did! Receive him with complete humility, remembering your sins and unworthiness. Receive him with joy, for in Christ our eyes have seen God's salvation. Receive him with praise and thanks to God for the gift of his Son. Receive him with love, and let his love be reflected in your words and actions to others. Receive him as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and proclaim his salvation to all people! Amen.

Whatever you have learned or received or heard [from God's Word]—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. Amen. (Php 4:9)