

“JESUS, SMALL AND LARGE”

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A southern pastor tells of his church creating a seasonal display for a shopping mall. It featured visual images flashing with the verse we sang over the screen, “Christ was born for this.” While that carol played nonstop, slides of poverty, war, riots, children, and families decorating Christmas trees flashed sequentially. The implication was: Christ was born for all of us, for now, for the poor, for the broken.

After two days the mall management called this church and demanded that they remove their thoughtful display. “Merchants find it too depressing. It will be bad for business,” came their protest. “People don’t want to think about stuff like that at Christmas.” In a sense, yes, we can understand the reaction of the merchants.

Yes, celebrating Christmas is all about rejoicing at a baby’s birth. Babies gladden our hearts. After months of waiting, preparing and expecting the arrival, we rejoice. Grandma arrives and helps. First pictures are shared. It delights the heart. But if we’re honest, remembering our children, we also recall feeling fear with gladness at our first baby. Am I holding this child too hard? Will she break? Is he getting enough food? Is she warm enough? *How will this child change our world?*

Maybe it’s the church’s unique calling—like that southern Methodist church in the mall—not to banish life’s uneasiness even at joyous celebrations like Christmas. Maybe only the church is equal to helping the rest of the world not become too sentimental mushy by remembering the whole story of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Church is the only place that tells stories like this from Luke, beyond angels and heavenly choirs, the romance of shepherds in fields by night and a bright star hovering above. We move into the humdrum of parents meeting their spiritual duties by taking their child to be dedicated at the temple. Jesus has hardly lost his birth wrinkles and purplish hue as Simeon gathers him up and blesses God.

Simeon and Anna are excited. They adore babies. Simeon exclaims he can now die in peace having glimpsed God’s plan of salvation in Jesus. He blesses the parents. Mary and Joseph are amazed at what old Simeon says about their Jesus.

But Simeon’s blessing of Joseph and Mary is no shopping mall jingle. Soberly, he forecasts, ““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.” (Lk. 2:34-35) Even if it was true, it was hard to hear eight days into Jesus’ life. Yes, Joseph and Mary knew their first son was uniquely different. That much would be expected of him. That much would rise and fall with his coming. But couldn’t Simeon let them linger a bit over the sweetness of that moment? ““This child is destined for the falling and

the rising of many in Israel.” Not what new parents of their firstborn want to hear!

Reprising Simeon’s mixed blessing years later, Jesus similarly said, “I have come not to bring peace, but a sword.” (Mt 10.34) What Jesus meant by this was similar to what Simeon intended decades before. Given Jesus’ sweeping mission of rescue and redemption, given his radically new and different divine plan from the bottom up, unrelated our ways of saving, our embrace of Jesus would be halting.

After all, we think God should do things our way. We resist doing things his way. Simeon foresaw and Jesus sensed our embrace of God’s new way would face deep resistance and serious rejection. Simeon predicted and Jesus affirmed that our relationship with him would not be without deep ambivalence. But then again, none of our most essential shared relationships are without ambivalence. I’m talking about our relationships with our parents, spouses, siblings, and children.

Here in the church, we tell the whole truth, that a cross waits behind that manger. We tell the truth that Jesus never did conform to people’s whims and prejudices. Jesus did not heap praise upon a status quo that had been faltering badly for generations. It was not in Jesus’ nature to relax God’s demands on us to be popular. Jesus was no glad-hander. Truth was indeed a sword in his hand. No, more like a scalpel in the hands of a skillful surgeon, to heal and not harm. What is amazing is that Simeon could see all of this—and not just Jesus’ mother’s eyes or his aunt’s chin—as he was no more than a wee rosy cherub just eight days in.

At first blush, when Jesus’ ministry meant changing water into wine at a wedding, healing the disabled and feeding five thousand, people still thought Jesus would do it their way. Everything was swell. His popularity rating was off the chart. But then everything changed. For Jesus began to describe a call of dying to himself, giving his will over to a higher will, and sacrificing himself for the many. At this juncture in John’s Gospel, a simple plaintive verse reads, “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.” (John 6:66).

The Rev. W. E. Orchard tells what this looks in today’s church. He and his wife visited a fashionable church as worshippers one Sunday. They had heard about this celebrated church, how its pastor passed his days amid the buzz of admiring and adoring people. So the Orchards wanted to see what the big deal was. As they settled into worship, it became obvious. As they looked around, they saw a frivolous people showing no visible interest in worshipping God. It was all country club chit-chat with almost no reference to the designs of heaven’s costlier graces. Orchard noticed his wife’s dismay at what she saw. “It is all very well that this upsets you, dear. But I for one could not fill this church,” he said. “No,” his wife replied, “but you could empty it in no time.” She clearly meant it as a compliment.

The masses will never grasp that the real Gospel is the Gospel of the cross and not of shopping mall jingles. The salvation purchased for us in Jesus’ loving self-sacrifice has little natural appeal. Christmas may be vulnerable to mass market-

ing, but Good Friday and Easter are not. For this Gospel reveals us for who we are. This Gospel reminds us that we cannot make it as our own little gods and must instead depend on the one true God. And we deeply resent this intrusion.

Beginning my ministry, I met in my church a retired schoolteacher, Marie, and her aged mother, Mary, then in her 90s. One week we invited a wonderful black choir into our lily-white church. Their pastor, Ben Cox, was active in the civil rights movement, arrested 17 times in the south. He had befriended me as a fledgling pastor. So we got our two churches together. The black choir brought their lovely children. Marie and Mary went on and on about how adorable one little boy was. He was cute, yes, but they clucked on and on till I felt uneasy. OK, give it a rest.

Weeks later as I called on them, they were flustered and fearful and angry. Why? A large black man had walked down the street and passed their house on the sidewalk. That was all. Had he done anything wrong? Well, no. Had he menaced them? No, he walked by straight ahead. They went on and on in a different way this time. Who was he? Why was he here? What business did he have? It was all I could do to calm them without saying pointblank how hatefully they were acting.

We do something like this with Jesus. We adore him as a child--cute, safe, and huggy. But then we get upset as he becomes a full-grown man, no longer cuddly, suddenly strong. The man Jesus doesn't apologize for his holy agenda of a new reign to dismantle and reconstruct the world as we know it. We're like Will Ferrell as Ricky Bobby in *Talladega Nights*, preferring to the baby Jesus over the man. Ricky's wife reminds him Jesus grew up. Will won't have it, praying to tiny Jesus.

We too take the baby Jesus over this powerful man Jesus any day of the week. For this grown-up Jesus calls our motives and how we live them into question. He demands we renounce all power and self-glory of success that we hold dear.

Maybe you have noticed that the crowd today is differently sized than those leading up to Christmas. Today our Scripture has compelled us to talk about why. You're here today because you know that Christmas joy is not an annual fantasy trip into never-never land. It is about a God who loves us so much as to refuse to leave us to our devices; a God who loves so deeply as to become one of us; a God willing to get his hands dirty in the human condition; a God willing to tell us a truth he knows that we shall resist, a God whose words are comfort and sword.

May God strengthen us to abide through the seasons of the rising and falling of many. May we remain steadfast by Jesus, who gladly shook some loose, and to whom others stuck fast. For nothing less than our destiny hinges on the full story. Amen.