**Law and Grace in a Baby’s Face**

**Text: Luke 2:22-35**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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More than 30 years ago, a grandfather gazed at his first grandchild. As he held the tiny infant he said, “She has an intelligent face.” No one else saw that. A cute face, an adorable face, even a beautiful face. That was evident to all. But the discerning grandfather saw an *intelligent* face. And as the child grew in wisdom and in stature, his prophecy proved to be correct.

Some folks can discern things that no one else can see. It’s right there, seemingly in plain sight. But only the discerning few can see it. Like Simeon. An aging man holding a tiny infant, he too saw something of the future in the child whom he cradled in his arms. In Jesus’ face he saw the Savior of Israel; and not just Israel but indeed the Savior of the world! And he saw something more: he saw confrontation and opposition; he saw suffering and death. He saw what happens when law and grace clash. Grace triumphs, but at a terrible cost.

Luke sets the scene for all of this by bringing Mary, Joseph and the newborn Jesus into the Temple for the performing of two rituals that *had* to be performed according to the Jewish law.

The first ritual involved the redemption of the child. Tradition said that the firstborn son belonged to the Lord. This reflects the Old Testament idea that the God who is the Giver of every good gift has a claim on the first fruits of the field, the flock and the family. In order for the parents to keep their first born son, they had to *redeem* the child; they had to symbolically *buy back* the child from God through bringing an offering to the Temple.

The second ritual is the purification of the mother following childbirth. Here the law required the sacrifice of an animal. Specifically, the law in Leviticus 12:6 required the sacrifice of a lamb *but*, there was a poverty clause: if the family couldn’t afford a lamb, they could sacrifice two pigeons instead (Lev. 12:8). And that’s what Mary and Joseph did.

Luke’s point here is two-fold. First, he wants to establish the fact that Jesus’ parents were pious, observant Jews. They lived according to the sacred law of Israel. Luke must do this in order to make it clear, right off the bat, that Jesus was the Savior of Israel; he was the Jewish Messiah. Yes, he was also a light to the Gentiles, he was the Savior of *all* peoples. But he was first of all the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophesies that promised salvation to the Jews, and then *through* the Jews to the *rest* of the world.

Secondly, Luke wants to establish the fact that Joseph and Mary – and thus, Jesus – were poor. They couldn’t afford the standard offering of the lamb, so their sacrifice had to be accepted under the poverty clause. Now, they weren’t the poorest of the poor; Joseph, after all, had a trade: he was a carpenter. But there were the *working* poor. They managed to get by with the religious equivalent of food stamps. There’s a piece of artwork that depicts the Holy Family as migrant workers, standing in a grocery store, dependent on charity to make ends meet. That’s the image that Luke paints of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

There’s one more element in this passage that we have to lift-up in order to figure out where Luke is headed, and that’s the Holy Spirit. We know it’s important to Luke because the Spirit is mentioned 3 times in the space of only 3 verses: the Holy Spirit *rested* on Simeon, it was *revealed* to him by the Spirit that he would live to see Messiah, and he was *guided* by the Spirit to the Temple just before Mary and Joseph arrived with Jesus (see Lk. 2:25-27). And, of course, it’s not only in this passage that the Holy Spirit is highlighted. The Spirit drives the action throughout both Luke’s gospel and his sequel, the Book of Acts. Jesus may’ve been raised in a household devoted to the Jewish law, but it is the gracious work of the Holy Spirit that moves the story forward. What we have here is not a plodding, legalistic saga where everyone is bending over backwards to get it right. No, what we have here is a *dynamic* saga, driven by the Spirit, that moves forward with energy and passion. The Spirit is in charge here, and those guided by the Spirit are not afraid to confront the obstacles that lie before them.

Those upon whom the Spirit rests are infused with grace. And what Simeon saw in Jesus’ face was grace; amazing grace: the sweet sound that saves the likes of you and me. Grace came into the world in Jesus Christ: not *just* in Jesus, but *especially* in Jesus. Grace is that amazing quality of God, revealed to the whole world in Jesus, by which we are accepted as way we are. It is God’s unconditional love, God’s infinite mercy, God’s desire to embrace us…in all of our imperfection; God’s desire to embrace us even when we mess-up, big time!

Sometimes we imagine that we’ve earned everything that we have through hard work. And, indeed, we *have* worked hard. And there’s good reason to feel some pride about that. But it’s not our hard work that has earned us God’s favor. Even our hardest work is too flawed by mistakes to be capable of earning the perfect love of God.

Now we can get all worried about that. And we can try even harder to get it right. And we can even be hesitant about doing much of anything for fear that we’ll get it wrong. Or, we can trust God’s grace and step out in faith. We can trust that even when we blow it big-time, God will pick-up the pieces and make it right. Even when we mess-up in a major way, God will still love us anyway. No matter how hard we try and how righteous we think we are, we can’t earn God’s love. Grace is God’s charity to poor sinners like you and me. We can see this in the Greek word for grace: *charis*. That’s the root of charity. We stand before God like poor migrant workers: despite our hard work we still have to depend on God’s charity; God’s grace; God’s unconditional love which is offered to us as a gift. And if it gives us great joy to receive it, it gives God even greater joy to offer it!

There’s a dynamic quality to God’s grace. It is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of the world and for the work of the Church. Just as it drives Luke’s story forward, it drives the Church forward. If we’re always worried about getting it right, we’re likely to hold back and not take action when action is called for. We hold back because we’re afraid of making a mistake. That’s what happens when you live strictly by the law; when you think you have to earn God’s favor by getting it right all the time. But when you live by grace, you’re more likely to take action, to charge ahead, to do what has to be done regardless of the consequences; because you know that no matter what happens, God’s going to be there, waiting for you, on the other side. And whether or not you get it right, God will still hold you in that warm embrace of grace. And we know this, instinctively, in a crisis. When the greasy skillet on the hot stove bursts into flames, there’s no time to ponder your options; you just do whatever has to be done to put out the flames. In a crisis, you just do it. You take the risk of doing it wrong because the alternative is certain disaster.

Well, there’s something to be said for living our lives that way: taking action; not hesitating too long and just doing it! Trusting in the guidance of the Holy Spirit to get it right, and knowing that even if you get it wrong, God can graciously make it right; God can graciously redeem the situation.

Armed with that knowledge, the Church engages in dynamic ministry. That same gracious Spirit that guided Simeon to the Temple and drove Jesus into the wilderness; that same gracious Spirit that rested upon Jesus when he preached good news to the poor, that same gracious Spirit that drove the first Christians forward into risky ministry in the face of deadly opposition: this is the gracious Spirit that rests upon us today, and that awaits us with open arms in the future. The Church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, lives by grace and lives forward!

Which is not to say that we can simply throw caution and tradition and established procedures out the window. The dynamism of grace lives within the boundaries of law. The Jewish law that Mary and Joseph followed so carefully helped to shape the home in which Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God. John tells us that grace and truth came through Jesus Christ while the law was given through Moses, but he never says that the law was somehow *negated* by grace (see Jn. 1:17). Both are important. We are saved by grace, but that very grace is revealed to the world through a religion that is based on law.

Without common understandings and proper procedures, a dynamic individual can destroy a community. But without a willingness to live large and take risks, that same community can collapse under the weight of its procedures and traditions.

Law and grace, and sometimes the collision between the two: this is what Simeon saw in Jesus’ face. He said, “This child is destined…to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.” And then he said to Mary, “A sword will pierce your own soul too.” Thus Simeon makes it clear that conflict lies ahead. Obstacles will be placed in Jesus’ path, and when he moves against them, there will be considerable pushback. Dynamic grace that has been informed by law will run-up against law that has not been tempered by grace. And the resulting conflict will lead to considerable pain – it will lead to the Cross – before it moves on to victory and new life and resurrection.

Yes, some difficult days lie ahead. Conflict is inevitable when the Church moves forward in the gracious power of the Spirit. Mistakes will be made and opposition will grow and sometimes there will be wisdom in that opposition even as there will be grace in those mistakes. Simeon can somehow see all of this. But he doesn’t tell Mary and Joseph that they should run and hide. Because he knows that destiny beckons the Holy Family forward. By retelling the story, Luke is inviting the Church to likewise go forward in faith. Amen.