

Luke 2:33–40
First Sun. after Christmas
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
December 31, 2023

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

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

The Gospel Lesson for this first Sunday after Christmas, the Sunday within the octave, or eight days, of Christmas, occurs in the Gospel of Luke, 40 days after the events of Christ's birth. The context is the presentation of the Christ child and the purification of Mary, which we celebrate on February 2. But the focus is on what elderly Simeon and elderly Anna profess about the Christchild. So there is a direct connection to what we celebrate at Christmas. Right after Simeon chants the Nunc Dimittis, which we sing every Sunday and festival day after the Lord's Supper, and which we discussed during Advent as one of the canticles of Christmas, Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph marveled at what was said of Jesus. They marveled at the Nunc Dimittis. Simeon then blessed them and said to Mary directly: "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed." At first, in the Nunc Dimittis, Simeon sang out with joy that his eyes had seen the Lord's salvation prepared for both Jew and Gentile. Now, he says Jesus will be opposed by many. So it always goes with Jesus. The Christchild we worship with joy is rejected. He comes to His own and His own do not receive Him, but for those who do receive Him, He gives the right to become children of God.

Simeon says about Jesus: "This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel." In Israel. Not among the Gentiles, but in Israel, in the true Israel, the church. Among God's people called out of the nations, many will fall and rise. As Mary sang in the Magnificat: He brings down the mighty from their thrones and exalts those of humble estate. He fills the

hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. With God, the usual order of things is reversed. What at first seems lowly is exalted, and what at first seems exalted is made lowly.

Another way of translating this verse is: “Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising *again* of many in Israel” (KJV). Jesus did not just come to humble the rich and exalt the poor. Jesus came to call all sinners to repentance, whether rich or poor, young or old, man or woman, Jew or Gentile. Jesus came to call all sinners to repentance that He might call all sinners to faith in the free forgiveness of sins, paid for by His death on the cross. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:23–24). Jesus knocks down our pride by showing us our sin in the mirror of the Law, but He does that in order to raise us up again to new life in Him. If you’re ashamed of your sin and the things you’ve thought, said or done—good! Jesus is here for you. If you’ve never even considered the sin in your life, then you’re simply not prepared to receive the Gospel.

Simeon also says that this child, the Christchild, will be a sign that is opposed, or a sign that is spoken against. For Christians during this Christmas season, this statement can be surprising. Who could oppose the baby Jesus in His humility? Who could speak against our LORD, who took such great pains to come and save us? Well, lots of people! Many people find Jesus intimidating because He threatens to take what little power and control they have. That’s why Herod, for example, killed all the boys of Bethlehem two years old and younger. He didn’t want competition with another King, even if that King’s kingdom is not of this world. Throughout the ministry of Jesus, the religious authorities opposed Jesus and tried to shut Him up. They tried to hide His miracles and then condemned Him without cause. The Jesus we love was so despised, so rejected and opposed, that He was nailed to the cross. His enemies stopped at no length to silence Him, but they couldn’t do it. Today, all those who don’t think of themselves

as sinners actually take offense at Jesus because He tells them they're not as good as they think they are, that their hearts are so hardened they can't even begin to recognize where they've messed up. People who think they're basically good end up despising Jesus, who says that even our good works apart from faith are considered as filthy rags before God. Only forgiven works are pure in God's sight.

The Prophet Jeremiah says: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" Apart from God revealing to us our sin, there's no way to understand it. God says: "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds" (Jer 17:9–10). The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was planted in the middle of paradise, in the middle of the Garden of Eden, as a test of man's loyalty. We often speak of the Tree of Life as a picture of Christ, but the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is also a picture of Christ, who is a test of mankind. And mankind consistently fails. Adam, the man, falls into sin. God searches the heart and tests the mind, and He finds us wanting. As the tree in the garden determined life and death, so does the tree of the cross, with our LORD nailed upon it. Behold the man, the man of sorrows acquainted with grief.

Many see this sign of the crucified LORD and they stumble over it. They can't handle the fact that God comes to save us in lowliness. The true intentions of their hearts are revealed. They want nothing to do with repentance, humility, and the mortification of the flesh. They don't want to be free of their sins and they don't want a Savior. They don't think they need a Savior. That's how most people live, even if they've been church members their entire life.

Another image used in Scripture for this concept is that of a stone. Isaiah 8:14 says the LORD of hosts "will become a sanctuary and a stone of offense and a rock of stumbling." Christ is the cornerstone. Jesus says: "The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone . . .

and the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” (Matt 21:42, 44). There are two and only ever two reactions to Jesus Christ. He is either the foundation of your life, or the destroyer. There is no middle option. You might think indifference or non-involvement is an option, but it’s not. The judge doesn’t care that you don’t care. In the end, that will only make the sentence worse. If your foundation and starting point is not Jesus Christ, whatever you build, no matter how stable it seems in this life, will come crashing down. But if Jesus is your foundation, you will be secure now and for eternity. He is the only sure foundation upon which to build. Those who reject or ignore the Christchild will fall and be crushed by Him. Those who receive the Christchild in faith will rise again to new life.

In the midst of his blessing, Simeon also speaks an aside to the Virgin Mary: “and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” Mary’s soul would be pierced through because of the opposition to her son. Simeon is recognizing that Mary will suffer personally for what her son, Jesus, was appointed to do. No parents want to see their children suffer. And when children do suffer, the sympathy on the part of the parents can be as real as the suffering of the children. Mary would watch her Son be rejected by men, tortured, and crucified for the sins of the world. She would suffer for His sake. But Mary would also be there at her Son’s resurrection. Those who bear the cross with Jesus here will be glorified in the Resurrection there. That goes for Mary and for all Believers. A sword would pierce Mary’s heart, but the words of Jesus can heal all physical, emotional, and spiritual trauma.

Our Gospel text then moves from Simeon’s prophecy and from the young Virgin Mary to the old Widow Anna. Anna was 84 years old, quite the age for that time period! She had been a widow for decades and lived as all faithful widows ought to live. She did not depart from the Temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. She went to the place where God is to

be found. She came to Jesus and gave thanks to God. Anna then spoke of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

There are many, many people waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem, waiting for their own redemption. Many of them simply don't realize it yet. There's a hole in their life, something missing, something not quite right. They sense something is off and they search for wholeness and for healing, oftentimes in the exact wrong places. Jesus is the redemption they are waiting for and He is drawing near. In today's world where youthfulness is praised and aging is avoided at all costs, there's hardly a place for Anna. Many people, especially the elderly, feel like they have no purpose. They forget that their purpose is to stay in the Temple, glorifying God, giving Him thanks, and telling others about Jesus. Believers like Anna and believers like you speak to those who are waiting, to those in the darkness searching for some kind of light. A light for revelation to the Gentiles is here! The glory of Israel! He has come to redeem the people from their sins, and He continues coming to you this very day in this Temple, in the Temple of His Body and Blood, in the Temple of His Word, in those specific places where God is dwelling with man. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, dear Christian, and cry to her that her warfare is ended and that her iniquity is pardoned in Jesus Christ our LORD. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Offertory.