

Mary's Sorrow

Luke 2:21-35

This Advent season we've been teaching on the life of Jesus' mother, Mary, the person who was closer to the first Christmas than anybody else. So far we've seen her response to God *before* the birth of her Child. She responded with faith when the angel told her she would bear a child who would be the Savior of the world. And she responded with a Song (which we call the Magnificat) that gave us an amazing vision of the Kingdom in which her son would reign.

Today we are going to fast-forward to an incident in the life of Mary shortly *after* the birth of Jesus. When Jesus was eight days old Mary and Joseph made the trip to Jerusalem to "present him to the Lord" and to have Him circumcised (Luke 2:21-22). Mary had an experience in the temple that probably changed her life forever. There Mary learned that because of her child, her life would be marked by sorrow. Up to that time, everything revealed about Jesus involved triumph and victory; but in the temple Mary learned that Jesus' life (and therefore her life) would also be marked by sorrow.

This Advent season, Mary's sorrow can give us a valuable perspective on our own sorrow. Just as the first Advent involved an element of sorrow, most of us here today are accompanied by some type of sorrow – some type of heartache. Your sorrow might be the result of a strained/broken relationship, the result of some sin (your own or someone else's), or simply the result of circumstances beyond your control. Sometimes we experience sorrow because this life just isn't working out the way we thought it would. With our sorrow in mind, let's see what we might learn from Mary's sorrow.

Simeon's Prophecy of Mary's Sorrow (Luke 2:21-35)

In verses 21-24 Luke describes how Mary and Joseph fulfilled all of the requirements of the Law. Ever since the first Passover when the children of Israel came out of Egypt, the first-born son belonged to the Lord; he was holy to the Lord. To symbolize this, the parents brought the child to the temple to dedicate him to the Lord. But he was then "redeemed" or "bought back" by the parents with certain sacrifices. Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to the Lord, and then redeemed Him with a sacrifice of birds - the offering required of those who couldn't afford to bring lambs. And so, irony or ironies, the Redeemer is redeemed with a sacrifice of birds.

In verse 25 we meet the man who understood - perhaps more than anyone else in the gospels - what Jesus' life would be like. We read in verse 25:

25 And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Apparently Simeon had only one item on his "bucket list": he wanted to see the Messiah, the 'consolation of Israel.' That's an interesting name for the Messiah, isn't it? The 'consolation' or 'encouragement' of Israel. Israel was a very downtrodden country in that day. There was the occupation of the Romans, the legalism of the Pharisees, the absence of the prophets. In the

midst of such circumstances, people like Simeon were looking for the relief that would come only through the Messiah. And the Holy Spirit Himself had revealed to Simeon that the longing of his heart would be fulfilled. Before he died, he would see the Lord's Christ (Christ = Messiah = 'anointed one').

In verse 27 we read how the Holy Spirit orchestrated this encounter between Simeon and the Messiah:

27 And he [Simeon] came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, 28 then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said,
29 "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart 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 OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES,
And the glory of Your people Israel."

As Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms, he knew that now life was complete. He expressed to God, *Now Lord, You may dismiss me in peace; as Your bond-servant, I have done everything that You've called me to do here on earth.* To me, this is one of the most touching scenes in the birth narratives of Jesus. Simeon, an old man, gets closure to his life by simply holding an infant.

Simeon explains himself there in verse 30, *For my eyes have seen Your salvation...* When he looked at the baby, he saw salvation. Jesus wasn't only bringing a **message** of salvation --- He Himself **was** salvation. It is impossible to separate forgiveness of sin, acceptance by God, and eternal life from Jesus Himself. This baby was God's Salvation!

Simeon goes on to describe the mission of Jesus in terms of what He would reveal to the people of this world. He would be *A light of revelation to the gentiles* (an allusion to Isaiah 49:6). John described Jesus as the 'light of the world.' Jesus would reveal to those outside Israel how they could have a relationship with the God of Israel.

And to Israel herself, Jesus would be *the glory of Your people Israel.* Just as the *shekinah* glory of God filled the temple, Jesus would shine forth the glory of God to Israel. Again, John said of Jesus that *we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father.* Jesus put on display God's character and His magnificent holiness. If people would only look at Jesus, they would see God Himself.

After this description of Jesus, we read in verse 33:

33 And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him.

Simeon had provided another wonderful confirmation for Joseph and Mary that they were within the will of God. They had heard from angels and shepherds and relatives how blessed this child would be. Here they heard from an aging priest that their Child was the Anointed One from God. And they were amazed.

Up to this point nothing Joseph and Mary had heard challenged the prevailing view of the Messiah's mission. When the Messiah came, the enemies of God would be routed (meaning that the Romans would be thrown out) and the Kingdom would be established (in Jerusalem, of course). The Messiah would conquer His enemies with overwhelming force. That's how God had defeated His enemies in the Old Testament; that's how people in the first century assumed God would do it in their day. The traditional view was understandably triumphal; there was no compelling reason to understand it any other way.

What Simeon says next changes everything. For the first time Mary began to understand that there would be suffering before there would be glory.

34 And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed-- 35 and a sword will pierce even your own soul-- to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

For the first time Mary heard that her Son's mission of bringing salvation to the world would involve confrontation, conflict, and suffering. Simeon said that this Child *is appointed [by God] for the fall and rise of many in Israel*. The NT consistently depicts Jesus as a 'stumbling block' which some would stumble over. Those who didn't accept Jesus' message would *fall*. Think of the vast majority of the Pharisees or Pilate or Judas.

But many others would *rise*. Interestingly enough, this word 'rise' is most commonly translated 'resurrection'! Luke would later use this same word for the resurrection of Jesus. Simeon probably wasn't talking here about bodily resurrection here, but the word is associated with *spiritual life and spiritual health*. Those who heard His message and believed Him would experience vitality and life. Instead of stumbling and falling, they would remain upright and to enter the kingdom of God. Think of Zaccheus or Nicodemus or the man blind from birth or the woman at the well.

As well, Jesus was appointed for *a sign to be opposed*. A 'sign' was a visible confirmation of something God had said. The shepherds had been given a 'sign': a baby lying in a manger would be a visible confirmation of what the angels had told them. Simeon here says that Jesus Himself would be a sign. His whole life would be a confirmation of God's words and intentions. When people saw Jesus' wisdom and power and miracles and self-control, the Word of God would be confirmed to them.

But notice that Simeon tells Mary that Jesus would be "a sign to be opposed." As you read through the gospels, you see that when people understood who Jesus really claimed to be, their opposition to Him grew. The opposition to Jesus as 'the sign of God' eventually led to His crucifixion.

We'll come back to his comment to Mary, but notice that Simeon mentions one more dynamic of Jesus' life: *thoughts from many hearts may be revealed*. When people encountered Jesus, the inner workings of their hearts were exposed. Nobody could hide when they were in the presence of Jesus. The thoughts of their hearts were revealed. Jesus was a fork in the road in the life of everyone He met. When people encountered Jesus, they were either drawn closer to God or confirmed in their unbelief. Of course the same thing is true today.

Everything Simeon has just said suggests that Jesus' ministry would be full of conflict and opposition. Simeon therefore tells Mary that *a sword will pierce even your own soul*. She would pay a personal price for the opposition Jesus would encounter in His life. Simeon didn't know these details, but he gave a prophetic statement of the anguish Mary would endure because of her Son.

We aren't told Mary's reaction to this prophecy by Simeon. But Luke has already emphasized Mary's thoughtful, contemplative response to everything that she heard and experienced. When the angel appeared and said, "Greetings favored one! The Lord is with you," we are told that she "kept pondering what kind of salutation this was" (Luke 1:29). When the shepherds arrived after the birth of Christ and related how the angels had told them that "there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," we are told that "Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19).

Surely Mary contemplated this statement about a sword piercing her own soul. Her exuberance over her Child sitting on the throne of David forever was tempered by the reality that His mission would be very costly – not only to Jesus but to her as well. She was given an exalted place in the history of salvation, but it would involve sorrow and suffering. In some ways, Mary was the first person ever to suffer for the gospel. When Jesus was eight-days old, Mary was introduced to the sorrow associated with the advance of the gospel.

I think we have to conclude that "a sword piercing her own soul" was *essential* to her calling as the mother of Jesus. God wanted Mary to share in the fellowship of Jesus' suffering. She could have died in childbirth and been spared the sword piercing her soul, but something would have been lost. Mary's sorrow wasn't a mistake and it wasn't wasted. Mary's sorrow was part of her calling. And Mary embraced that part of her calling.

What might Mary's sorrow teach us this Advent? Three things come to mind: First, ***we can embrace our sorrow as part of God's calling in our lives***. Mary's experience suggests that God wants our hearts broken for the right things. Mary could have backed away from her calling once it became obvious that Jesus would endure what no mother wanted her son to endure. But she didn't. Mary watched as Jesus was arrested, tortured, and then crucified. Mary didn't shrink back from her sorrow. Mary watched Jesus gasp for breath, speak His last words, and die. As we'll see next week, Mary stood at the foot of the cross ***both*** as a mother and as a disciple of Jesus. And a sword pierced her own soul.

If you and I are going to fulfill our calling in this world, we will have to make peace with the idea that it is the will of God for us to experience sorrow, even deep sorrow at times. You can avoid a lot of sorrow by keeping your distance from people; you can isolate yourself from the suffering around you. You will avoid sorrow, but you will also avoid the satisfaction of being used by God in people's lives.

This past year I've heard stories about how many of you have been willing to get involved in the lives of others who are suffering: coworkers, acquaintances, neighbors, random people you meet in stores. Instead of protecting and isolating yourself from others' pain, you have entered in and shared their sorrow. I love that you aren't afraid to experience heartache and to suffer along with others. It's costly, just like it was costly for Mary. But it's worth it. ***Because God calls us to show compassion toward hurting people, we can embrace sorrow as part of God's calling in our lives.***

Second, ***our sorrow can lead to humility.*** Just as Mary was informed that she would bear a Child who would be called the Son of the Most High God, she was also informed that "a sword will pierce your own soul." She wasn't asked if this were okay; she was informed. And God doesn't consult with us before piercing our souls with a sword. We are in control of very few things in our lives; we have the illusion of control sometimes, but "life happens" and we realize that we really aren't in control of our health, our finances, our children, this church, etc. It's like Dale Burke says, "God is omni-everything and I'm omni-nothing."

When sorrow enters our life, it should therefore humble us to the core. Our sorrow should prompt us to cry out on a heart-level, "God, You are sovereign and I'm not." That's a stance of humility. I've noticed that the broken-hearted have a depth of humility that others usually don't. Parents who have children with severe disabilities often have this type of humility. Their lives have been radically altered by circumstances far beyond their control. When they work through the sorrow and pain of it all to the settled place that God is still sovereign, the result is a depth of humility that is beautiful.

This Advent season, let's allow our sorrow to soften our hearts and produce the fruit of humility in our lives.

Our sorrow can show us where God is at work. If we follow Mary's sorrow, it points like a laser to what God was doing in this world. And in this world – this sin-saturated world – our sorrow clues us in to what God is doing in our midst. Frederick Buechner wrote this:

Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention. They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where . . . you should go next.

Beuchner, *Beyond Words*

When was the last time you had unexpected tears? When was the last time your heart was broken – either over something in your own life or in the life of others? Your sorrow is a clue to where God is at work in your life and in the lives of others.

This past week I was talking with a friend who has entered into more sorrow than most. Her comment was that when we embrace our suffering, we're no longer "victims"; we are now participants with God in what He's doing. I think that's exactly right. Our sorrow is God's invitation to be involved in what He's doing in our lives. It's an invitation to care – and therefore to pray and to love.