

Sermon for Sunday, December 7, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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CHRISTMAS: DO NOT DETACH
St. Luke 2:1-7; 21-55

Text: "and Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against...'" St. Luke 3:34

Christmas is for children--children of all ages! I'm not sure just how religious Christmas really is. As a matter of fact, Lucy, in the comic strip "Charlie Brown", claims that Christmas actually belongs to an eastern syndicate. I suspect for most of us that Christmas is more of a family time, or a time for nostalgia, than it is religious. I know for myself that there is a whole cluster of sentimental memories gathered around this season of the year. When I was a child, my grandparents lived across the street and they always put up a hugh tree that touched the ceiling. They still used little holders that clipped to the branches and held real candles. Of course, the fire marshal wouldn't permit that at all today! But they did have one string of electric lights. The other day out driving, one of the radio stations on a talk show had a lady on the program who collected what has become collector item tree decorations from years past. She described a choice item which was a figure of a Santa going back to the earliest Christmas tree lights and said it was a real antique, a genuine treasure. Well, my grandparents had one of those on that string of lights. And the highlight of the year was when the lights were plugged in and Santa glowed in all the glory of his costume.

I suspect most of you have some very special memories of your childhood when your family put out special decorations or did special things. When the children at our house were very young, the big event was the night we picked the Christmas tree. It was always an exciting time finding just the right one, bringing it home, setting it up, and everyone joining in on the decoration.

Do you have some memories like that? I think the thing we need to remember is that most of things we associate with Christmas are really not all that religious. It's sort of like the cartoon I saw recently. It showed a couple opening Christmas cards and the caption had the man speaking and saying, "Well, I wonder what's gotten into the Graysons--a religious Christmas card."

Even the things about Christmas that revolve around Jesus are very tame--very sweet--very angelic. There is something very inoffensive about a tiny baby in a manger scene, with all the barnyard animals gathered around--and the shepherds. And partly its inoffensive because you can't smell the barnyard--or the shepherds, who probably hadn't bathed lately. Of course, the three wise men in their rich apparel add just the note of elegance to the whole thing.

Is there anything about all of this to stir up vile emotions? Well, of course not! There is nothing here but sweet sentimentality. There is nothing of hate or violence or murder. There is nothing here that separates a man from his brother, or a person from his own family--is there? There is nothing here of judgment, nothing of a last chance, nothing of impending doom--is there? There is nothing here to create hate and vengeance--like leaded thongs cutting the flesh of a man's back, of nails piercing through flesh and bones, of spears slashing the flesh of human bodies, of crosses and death--is there?

Yet, eight days after the birth of Jesus, when his parents bring him to the temple to be circumcised according to Jewish law, an old man of God takes the child in his arms and he makes a prophecy, "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your [Mary's] own soul also), that thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

What kind of thoughts do you have in your heart this morning? What kinds of emotions are you often feeling in your heart, what kinds of bad things do you often find going through your mind? Christmas says all those things are going to be revealed. I don't like that, do you? What is in my heart and mind is very private. I don't want anybody knowing what I think or feel or the kind of lusts and passions and vile emotions that often race across my soul--do you? I don't want my greed and jealousy and hate and selfishness exposed to anybody. And I suspect you don't either.

But that's what old Simeon said. He said you and I are going to be exposed for who and what we are. He said that many of God's people, the children of God, are going to rise or fall because of Jesus. Do you realize what that means? It means you can't separate the cradle from the cross, the nativity from the nails, the shepherds from the scourging, the angels from the agony, the glory from the gory. That little baby in the manger can never be isolated. No, he always is the child who grows up. He is the Christ who speaks God's word to us, he is the one who says that those who believe not are condemned already. He is the one who finally goes to the cross to die for sinful people like you and me, and who says of himself, "no one comes to the Father but by me."

Do you begin to understand? Christmas is non-detachable. You just can't separate it from the rest of the story. I think I would like to. I think it might be nice to keep Christmas revolving around family and memories and gifts and happy things. Unfortunately it won't work that way. Across the stable in Bethlehem falls the shadow of a cross, and Christmas is non-detachable.

Maybe you never thought of it just this way before, but the secularization Christmas may be a covert effort, an unconscious effort, on our part to detach Christmas from the cross. You see, if we can do that and just keep all the nice, warm, fuzzy things that make us happy, we don't have to think about the other things.

We don't have to think about things like, "except your righteousness exceed that of the scribes and pharisees, you shall not see the kingdom of Heaven." We don't have to think about a child who grew up and said to us, "No man, putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God." We can ignore such things as, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." We can close our ears to things like, "Take up your cross and follow me," or, "No one can serve two masters...", or, "if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out," or, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Well, I don't know about you, but I would like to detach Christmas from all of that. The Bible says that Jesus is God's final word to us. Jesus is the last and best thing God has to say to us. In Jesus God says, "I love you, I care about you." At the cross God says, "I want to forgive you and here in the sacrifice of my own Son I have made a way of restoration and healing and forgiveness --all you have to do is receive it as a free gift."

But that is hard. To give my heart to Jesus means to surrender my life to Him. It means to put my heart under His control, to put my will under His command. It means to go and be and do all He wants of me. It means giving up self; it means judging everything by His standards; it means obedience and faithfulness; it means service and sacrifice. And frankly, that's not what I had in mind for Christmas--was it what you had in mind? But, as it turns out, Christmas is non-detachable.

There is another interesting phrase in our scripture this morning. Did you notice it? Old Simeon said that Jesus would be a sign that would be spoken against. Do you know anybody speaking against Jesus? Well, how about atheistic Marxism--doesn't it speak against Jesus? An incredibly large portion of the world's population is under the domination of Communism and Christianity has been dreadfully repressed. There is a strong socialist influence in our country today and ultimately it will seek to repress the story of Jesus.

And what about secular humanism? Do you realize that today we can't pray in our public school system, that we can't read the Bible, and that we can't even display the ten commandments? Is it any wonder that morality is declining and immorality is rampant? And did you realize that secular humanism--which is in itself a dreadful kind of religion--is the philosophy of life that is being taught in our public schools. Yes, Jesus is a sign spoken against right here in our own country.

What about the churches? Could you believe that Jesus would be spoken against there? Yet, the fact is there are many ministers who do not believe the virgin birth of Jesus, who deny His literally resurrection, who do not believe the atonement of the cross. Instead, they preach a social gospel which says that the primary task of the church is to change the structures of society. That's sad, isn't it? What the world needs today, as it needed on that first Christmas, was a Saviour--a saviour who would heal the brokenness between God and man, who would give man a new heart and a new life.

So, there are those--just as Simeon said--who speak against Jesus. Would you ever do that? Would you ever separate Christmas from the rest of the story and in effect deny everything? I wouldn't want to speak against Jesus. But when I'm unloving and unforgiving, am I speaking against him? When I am selfish and self-centered, do I say an ugly word against Jesus? When I do what I want to do instead of what I know God wants me to do, am I saying an ugly word about Christmas? When I do things I know are wrong--is that speaking against Him?

As I think about it, there is an awful lot in my life that is in opposition to Jesus. Is that true in your life, too? Are there a lot of things going on in your life that you wish Jesus didn't know about?

But we can't detach Christmas--the birth of Jesus--from the words of Jesus or the example of Jesus or the life of Jesus or the death of Jesus or the commands and teachings of Jesus. Do you know what all of us need this morning? We need to let Christmas happen in us. We need to let Jesus be born in our hearts. Just for a moment, let's forget the warm, fuzzy things. Let's put aside the memories and the traditions and the gifts. Just for a moment, let's remember that Christmas is God loving us so much that He sends His son that might be set not only for the fall of many but for the rise of many. God wants you to rise with Jesus, not fall. Just for one moment let's get Christmas attached to the cross and say, "Lord, you died for me. Come now, make a Christmas in my soul and be born in my heart." Will you do that this morning?