

Christmas and the cross: Luke 2:22-40

Simeon offers a subtle instruction to Mary: remember the cross.

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

Luke 1 and 2 are often described as “the Lukan infancy and childhood narratives”—the stories of Jesus’ birth and early childhood. That description is fine, but as Eugene Peterson has suggested, there is another way of framing the opening of Luke: these two chapters are a primer in prayer. Prayers saturate the first two chapters of Luke. Practically the entire story of Jesus’ birth is told in prayers—in the *Fiat mihi* (“Let it be to me according to your will”), Mary announces her acceptance of God’s will; in the Magnificat (“My soul glorifies the Lord”), she praises God for turning things upside down and inside out.

The next prayer is spoken by Zechariah, the husband of Mary’s cousin, Elizabeth. He has been struck mute for months. On the day that his son John is named and circumcised, Zechariah finally gets his speech back. In that situation, my first words might be curses. But Zechariah’s first words are words of prayer: “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.” Then comes a prayer that is very familiar to us at Christmas time—the Gloria: in the wake of Jesus’ birth, a chorus of angels sings “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.” Today, we repeat that prayer, which praises God and declares God’s will for peace.

Finally, in verses 29-32 of Luke 2, we get the prayer now known as the *Nunc Dimittis*

:

Lord, you now have set your servant free
to go in peace as you have promised;
For these eyes of mine have seen the Savior,
whom you have prepared for all the world to see:
A light to enlighten the nations,

and the glory of your people Israel.

Praying this prayer at bedtime as we sometimes do, we risk domesticating what is really a quite remarkable and unsettling scene. It is unsettling not only because Simeon is announcing his readiness to die. He is also alerting Mary to Jesus' death: "A sword will pierce your own soul too." Here he is predicting her suffering, and, by extension, he is suggesting Jesus' suffering, since it is the piercing of Jesus' side that will pierce her. Simeon's opaque and poetic line, in other words, is a subtle instruction to remember the cross.

Remember the cross at Christmas? Aren't we supposed to think about the cross on Good Friday, and the manger, homely and sweet, today? Actually, remembering the cross is part of the adult version of Christmas. Let's face it; Christmas is a time of great happiness, but it is also, for many of us, a time of great struggle. At Christmastime, some of us count up all the people we loved who have died, and we yearn for them. Some of us feel hideously lonely, and our loneliness seems all the more glaring because it's out of sync with the script of seasonal happiness we think we're supposed to be following. We are not alone in this suffering. Mary, our text hints, was suffering on Jesus' behalf, in anticipation of Jesus' later suffering.

Simeon's reminder of Jesus' suffering and our suffering brings us back to prayer. We are called into a life in which God, in response to our suffering, breaks into the world, and that in-breaking is accompanied by God's own suffering (and the suffering of God's mother, Mary). We heed Jesus' call into a suffering life by prayer. Prayer, after all, is the place where we enter into one another's suffering, and where God draws near to our suffering. It is also the place where we participate in God's comfort and in God's redemption of our suffering—and this baby Jesus does not conquer the powerful with the sword, but by living a life of suffering and prayer, and by dying.

Over and over throughout the first two chapters of Luke, God's faithful people respond to God by praying. I take two larger insights about prayer from these praying faithful. First, prayer is the channel through which we participate in God's breaking into the world. Second, prayer is not a hard task that we have to initiate. Rather, our prayer, like the prayers of Mary, Zechariah, the angelic choir and Simeon, is a response to the work that God is already doing. This is part of the good news of the *Nunc Dimittis*—God enters into our lives not just by being born 2,000 years ago, but by constituting a community of praying people that includes an unmarried teenage girl who is pregnant and an elderly man who is on his last legs. And just as that teenage girl and that old man enter God's story through

proclamations of faithfulness and praise, so too God enters our lives by inviting us to enter into God's life through prayer.