

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian
Church Kingstowne Virginia on Sunday, December 28, 2008**

IS CHRIST ENOUGH?

Luke 2:21-35

What did Santa bring you for Christmas? Did you get what you wanted? That may seem like an odd way to begin a sermon. But so often it is the first question we ask children when we see them on Christmas Day.

That's the way it was for me. As a child, my parents encouraged my sister and me to believe in Santa Claus. I remember doing all that I could to insure that Santa brought just what I wanted. We had just one department store in Oelwein, the little town in central Iowa where we lived – Sears and Roebuck. Except for the Woolworth, McCarty's pharmacy and the A&P grocery store, that's where everyone did their shopping. In those days, long before the Internet, the good stuff – like toys – came from Sears. Every year, in the weeks before Christmas, the department store Santa set up shop in the toy section of Sears. And every year, my sister and I would roam the toy department to see what was available for Santa to take and put under our tree.

Like most little boys, I would excitedly pick out all of the several toys that caught my eye and when the appointed day arrived, I would visit Santa and tell him of my heart's desires. Sometimes, he brought all that I had asked for. But on some years, he did not get the order quite right. I remember the Christmas I got the toy truck I picked out but also a pair of socks and hair tonic that this seven-year-old boy had not ordered. I figured Santa had just gotten the order mixed up, so the next year I cut out the entries in the Sears catalog for all my requests and brought them to Santa, just so the jolly old elf wouldn't confuse my Christmas wish with that of someone else. That way, I could tell everyone who asked that Santa brought me just what I wanted.

Seems to have missed the point of Christmas, doesn't it? Like many children – and many adults – we got so wrapped up in the Santa Claus myth of giving and receiving presents that we forgot about the real Christmas gift – the gift of a Savior Jesus Christ.

This morning I want to talk about part of the Christmas story that is often forgotten. Though we don't often include it in our Christmas pageants and nativity scenes, it's an important part of the Christmas narrative – it is an event that probably took place between the time the shepherds visited Jesus in the manger and the day the wise men came with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It's the story of a man named Simeon, who longed for the real gift of Christmas, and as a consequence, got just what he wanted.

BACKGROUND: JESUS' PRESENTATION AT THE TEMPLE

Let's first try to understand the background of the passage. It contains some allusions to Old Testament rituals that may not be familiar to us. They are given to help us see that Jesus was born to fulfill the requirements of the Old Testament law.

Galatians 4:4-5 tells us that “God sent His Son, born of a woman, under the law, to redeem those under the law so that we might receive the full rights as sons.” In other words, Jesus, who was fully divine and fully human, would obey God’s requirements for holiness on our behalf because you and I could not. He was without sin, and in every respect, He did all that God required.

Jesus lived a righteous life. Everything He did was right. That is good news for us. Just as the Old Testament sacrifices demanded a perfect Lamb, one without spot or blemish, Jesus became the perfect lamb for us. When we put faith in His work on the cross, when we trust in His death and resurrection, His righteousness not only pays for our sins. It is put on us.

We can never be good enough to merit His favor. The Bible says that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. No matter how good we try to be, no matter how many kind and helpful things we do for other people, we can never muster up enough righteousness to earn our salvation.

In the same way, after we have trusted Him, we can never be good enough to keep His favor. God doesn’t just forgive our sins and send us on our way. He imputes the righteousness of Christ to us; that is, He clothes us with the perfect life of Christ so that when God looks down from heaven at our lives, He sees the life of a man who obeyed the Law in every way.

So here, even as a little baby, Jesus and His parents submitted to God’s Law. He was circumcised on the eighth day according to Old Testament Scripture. We see the New Testament picture of that obedience in Katie Foster’s baptism today. We see also that Mary and Joseph obeyed God’s command as given by the angel (verse 1:31): to give the child the name Jesus, Joshua, literally, Savior.

Second, we see that in forty days after His birth Christ was presented at the temple. This was actually two separate ceremonies: the purification of Mary and Joseph and the redemption of the firstborn child.

What was this purification ceremony? According to Leviticus 12, in ancient Israel, after a woman gives birth, she is considered ceremonially unclean and must stay away from religious things like entering the temple. After forty days (twice as long for a girl), the parents are to offer a lamb and dove (or pigeon) for an offering. They can give two pigeons instead of a lamb, if they are poor like Mary and Joseph. The offering was not for salvation, but to remind them of God’s perfect holiness. When the Christmas couple gave this offering, they were reminded that their God is a holy God, set apart from all He created, and that in everything, including the birth of a child, they needed His help and deliverance.

Additionally, the firstborn boy is to be consecrated or redeemed. This practice goes way back to the time the Jews were slaves in Egypt. God sent Moses to intercede for the Hebrews and persuade Pharaoh to let them go, but the Egyptian wouldn’t budge. So the Lord launched a series of ten plagues on Egypt to force Pharaoh’s hand.

The tenth plague was the most devastating – the death of every firstborn male in the land – every Egyptian, every slave, even the cattle. But the Lord promised to pass over the household of every Jew where a lamb was slaughtered and its blood smeared over the doorpost. In this way, God regarded the Passover lamb, as it was called, to be a substitute for the Jewish boys. The lamb was killed so that the firstborn among the Hebrew children lived and the people were let go.

From then on, throughout all Israel the firstborn child was symbolically consecrated as a reminder that God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt, and metaphorically that He redeemed them from their sins. Mary and Joseph fulfilled the requirements of this law by redeeming Jesus, while at the same time Jesus had entered the world as the perfect lamb to become the final and ultimate substitute. He was the Christmas gift.

FOR SIMEON, CHRIST WAS ENOUGH

So the whole motif of this trip to the temple was one of deliverance. That is what Simeon understood. Jesus was the perfect lamb, the perfect Christmas gift. For Simeon, Christ was enough.

You see, Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel; he was waiting for the appearance of the promised comforter. A devout and righteous man, he loved the Lord and he knew the Scriptures. He knew that the Old Testament promised the coming of a Messiah and he longed for that Messiah to come. Scriptures like Isaiah 40 must've been on his heart:

Comfort, comfort my people says your God.
 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her
 that her service had been completed, that her sin had been paid for,
 that she had received from the Lord's hand, double for all her sin ...
 Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall.
 But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
 They will soar on wings like eagles.
 They will run and not grow weary.
 They will walk and not be faint (Isa 40:1-2, 29-31)

At that first Christmas, the Jews were a captive people, so these words of comfort meant a great deal for any devout Jew. Many years had gone by since Israel had been a free nation and the Old Testament promises seemed a long way off. God's people had rebelled against their Lord and had reaped what they sowed. Now, the Romans occupied Palestine and many, like Simeon, waited expectantly for a deliverer.

The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that the promised deliverer, the promised Savior was right there in front of him. The little baby that Mary and Joseph brought to the temple was the consolation of Israel, the one they had been waiting for all these years.

Simeon tenderly took Jesus in his arms and with joy on his face praised God, saying that he had seen the Lord's salvation. Look at the emotion in his song in verses 29-32:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
 You now dismiss your servant in peace.

For my eyes have seen your salvation,
 which you have prepared in the sight of all people,
 Light for revelation to the Gentiles
 and for glory in your people Israel.

Do you sense the feeling in Simeon's words? Simeon's song is filled with a passion for the people of the world. He knows that the promised Messiah was not just for the Jews, but also for the whole world, for all people. He knew that ancient Israel existed to bring light to everyone, just like the church exists to bring the gospel of Christ to every nation and every people today. The apostle Paul would write, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to all who believe, to the Jew first and also the Greek" (Rom 1:16).

By seeing Jesus, Simeon had seen God's salvation for the world. He had received his heart's desire; he had all he wanted and was now ready to go. He had beheld his Savior and was ready to face whatever God had in store for him. Christ is enough!

FOR US, CHRIST SHOULD BE ENOUGH

Let me ask you this: Are you like Simeon? Is Christ enough for you? Most of us would have to say that other things crowd out our desire for Christ. We want all the good stuff that God might give us – a comfortable lifestyle, good health, family and friends, good grades in school and a successful career. But if any of those things are denied us, don't we complain?

I know I do, and you probably do too! How would you react if everything were taken away and all we have left is the forgiveness of sins we have through Jesus? Would Christ be enough? Would you miss the whole point of Christmas? Sinclair Ferguson in his new book In Christ Alone, warns us of what he calls Santa Christ Christianity.

We "manufacture a Jesus who is a mirror reflection of Santa Claus . . . Like Santa [Jesus] simply asks whether we have been good. More exactly, since the assumption is that we are all naturally good, Santa Christ asks whether we have been "Good enough." So just as Christmas dinner is simply the better dinner we really deserve, Jesus becomes a kind of added bonus who makes a good life even better. He is not seen as the Savior of helpless sinners.

Simeon's encounter with Jesus in the temple doesn't allow for the Santa Christ Christianity kind of thinking. Look at his words to Mary in verse 34: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign to those spoken against so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too." This is not the typical thing you say to a new mother!

And they certainly move us away from the cozy, sentimental way we tend to treat Christmas. These words put the reality of Christ in our lives front and center.

Jesus will cause some to rise and fall. This could mean either of two things. Some in Israel (and in the world) may have faith in Christ and some may not. He will divide people into two camps: those who accept Him as Lord and Savior and will inherit eternal

life and those who reject Him and inherit eternal punishment. Scripture teaches us that Jesus is the way, the truth and the light and no one comes to the Father but through Him. Jesus Christ alone is all we need for salvation. He is the only way. Without Him, we are lost and without hope.

Or falling and rising may mean that those who have communion with Him will fall with His crucifixion and rise with His resurrection. The message of Christmas is that Jesus came into the world to die on a Cross. That is the reason for the Incarnation. The primary purpose of Jesus' life was not to be a good example. It was not to heal the sick or encourage the brokenhearted, not to do away with poverty and suffering. Those are important and are on the heart of God, but they do not communicate the real purpose of Jesus' coming. Christ came to die! "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). That truth was revealed to Simeon and that's why he had to say the hard words to Mary that a sword will pierce your soul. Jesus would die.

But that is good news for us. We are called to fall and rise with Him. Unless we lose all pride in our spiritual achievement, unless we see ourselves as people who need a Savior, there is no place for us. We must come to Christ like the lowly tax collector, who sees nothing in himself that would bring God's favor and cries out: "Have mercy on me a sinner!" When we admit our desperate need for salvation and die to ourselves – by faith, allow ourselves to die with Jesus on the cross and trust in Him for forgiveness and new life, we fall and rise with Him. There is no other way to salvation.

In this way, Jesus is a sign to those spoken against. Everyone who rejects Jesus is lost and condemned. They are without hope. But those of us who have accepted God's mercy in Christ have nothing to brag about. We are not better than those who do not believe – sometimes our lives are in a greater shambles than our unbelieving friends. Our only claim is that we have simply accepted the Christmas gift. We echo the words of the British slave trader John Newton, who after coming to Christ said: "I am a great sinner, but I have a great Savior."

That is what's so comforting about Christ. He reveals to us our innermost thoughts and tells us in His Word that we fall short of God's glory. He convicts us of our sinfulness; not simply our breaking a list of dos and don'ts, but the fact that in every fiber of our being we miss the mark and fall short of God's perfect standard. He tells us that we need a Savior – not because we are as bad as we could be, but because every one of us is not as good as we should be. He doesn't do this to lay a guilt trip on us but to bring us to a point in our lives that we know we must depend on His grace.

When the Holy Spirit convicts you of wrongdoing, don't run from it. Don't hide from God. Instead, confess your sins to Christ and enjoy His promised forgiveness. When God speaks to you about your sin through His Word or through the words of other people, embrace the divine opportunity to restore your fellowship with God.

Now there may be some of you here today for whom this is new. Perhaps you never thought that salvation was a gift. Maybe you think God, like Santa Claus, will check to see if we've been naughty or nice, and reward us accordingly. That's a pretty scary way to go through life, because we'd never know if we measured up.

Maybe you think that Jesus does provide the opportunity for salvation, but that you and I have to add something to it, like being baptized, going to confession to a priest or pastor, or joining the church. But that would make Christmas no longer a gift, but something we have to earn for ourselves. The message of Christmas would provide very little comfort.

If this is where you are, I encourage you to boil the message down to its simplest terms, the way Simeon did. Don't let the Christian message get complicated, for it is not meant to be that way. Simply acknowledge that you are a person who really does sin and really does need a Savior, confess that need to Jesus, believe that He came and took the punishment you deserve and died for you on the Cross and ask Him to forgive. He will! He is the promised Messiah.

I suspect that most of us have come to that point in our lives when we accepted Christ's forgiveness. We have trusted in His work on the Cross and have experienced His salvation. But in your daily walk, is Christ enough? If everything else got taken away, would you be satisfied in Jesus?

I am sure that if you are honest with yourself you'll admit that sometimes you want something more than the Christ of Christmas. Let me encourage you to do a few things:

First, let Christ open your heart and reveal your thoughts. Examine your motives as well as your behaviors and learn why, even as a Christian, you do the things you do, those things that are not pleasing to the Lord. Seek to always be in a process of change and growth.

Second, recognize that each of us has a tendency to let our heart deceive us, so we need other people in our lives who will help us see the truth about ourselves. Hebrews 3:1 encourages us to seek the counsel of other people: "Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."

Finally, remind yourself over and over again what Christ has done for you. We must preach the gospel to ourselves: We are sinners who are unable to please God apart from His work in us. But He loved us so, that He became a man, entered our world, died in our place and gave up His life. The more you remind yourself of what Christ has done, the more you'll be able to say that Christ is enough.

Let me close with a story about Polycarp, a bishop in 2nd century. He faced death by fire because of his faith in Christ. He was charged with atheism; that is, he refused to believe that Caesar was god. He was an old man and his accusers wanted to spare his life. They urged him to swear by Caesar. His accuser said, "Reproach Christ and swear that Caesar is god and I will set you free." Polycarp's response was: "For eighty and six years have I served Christ. Never has He done me any injury. How then can I now blaspheme my king and my savior?" He was burned at the stake and became a martyr.

Polycarp was one who could say Christ is enough. Is Christ enough for you? For him, like each of us, it is a matter of the heart. I pray that 2009 will be a time where we allow Christ to open our hearts more and more so that He is enough.