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SERMON TITLE: *The Sword of Faith*
SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:21-35
DATE: January 31, 2021
View online service at www.fpcd.org/live-stream

Read also Psalm 29:2-11

you know how annoying it is when you have to get up in the night from a sound sleep. You are drowsy, and that's not a bad thing. As eye doctors would say, your pupils are dilated. But, you don't want to hurt yourself when you get up to do what you have to do, so you flip on the light, and that brightness is a shock to the system. You squint. It forces you to see but you resist the light because your intention is to preserve the drowsiness to go back to sleep.

Ever experience that?

Or, maybe you are younger. And you have been out. It's late and very dark. You hope to sneak in so you don't turn on the hall light. But an unwanted interloper flips on the light while you are tiptoeing to your room.

Light and dark clash. This is a profound principle from science to theology. The Bible uses this imagery to present the presence of God in the world. It is both good, bad, and shocking to the system. In Hebrew, the word used when Isaiah says "the people who walked in darkness have seen a great *light*" (אִוֵּר) – it's a blast of brightness, like a lightning bolt. (v. 9:1) It's shockingly brilliant as it enters the darkness.

Encounters with God in the Bible are like this. Remember:

- ✓ Moses seeing the burning bush. Have you seen a roaring bonfire at night?
- ✓ The lightning and thunder on Mount Sinai when God gave Israel the law.
- ✓ Elijah fleeing for his life to Mt. Horeb and being confronted by a wind so strong it broke boulders; an earthquake that split mountains; and then a fire.

When God, who is outside us, comes into the world there's a great clash; a great, sudden brightness; an overwhelming power. It's frightening, yet we are drawn toward it.

When Moses begged to see God, he was told seeing God would kill him, so he was only allowed to see an apparition of God's back. Elijah did not see God either. After earthshaking events, God only whispered to him. God made these concessions because God's power is so great it is too much for us.

Psalm 29 echoes those images for us:

The God of glory thunders
The voice of the LORD—
splits the mighty cedars,
strikes with bolts of lightning,

makes the barren wilderness quake,
twists mighty oaks and strips the forests bare.

In his Temple everyone shouts, "Glory!" (v. 3-5, 7-9)

Some are drawn toward God and others run and hide as if discovered by sudden light in the hallway.

Believers long to behold him and beholding him, are filled with JOY! Others quake in terror. All of us face the light that reveals the truth about us. So light in darkness is a two-edged sword.

Jesus said something interesting about all this:

"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

His sword causes resistance in some.

We are talking about spiritual actions that will help us defeat the plague. We must understand that spiritual devotion, and the call to turn to God receives resistance from the world.

Let's read our passage. READ Luke 2:21-35.

Jesus came to the world. To many he is a joy. But, his presence causes others to oppose him and thus fall. A sword will pierce Mary's soul. Perhaps Simeon speaks of the terror of the cross. I cannot imagine her grief.

That sword pierced others too, like the disciples. They were under threat just by their association with Jesus.

Paul was beaten, run out of town and opposed because he preached about Christ. As we stated earlier, Elijah had to run for his life because Queen Jezebel sought to kill him for his faith in God. Moses had a showdown with Pharaoh who feared no god.

Today, Christians can be mocked for their moral beliefs which run counter to our present culture. Businesses can be reviled for taking moral and religious stances. You and I can be ridiculed when we stand for Christ.

God's very presence exposes the world's darkness and disrupts it. That disruption causes strong opposition.

Yet as God comes into the world through Christ, causing unsettling resistance, it also brings much joy as **we see our Savior.**

What's your reaction to Christ?

At the time Jesus was born, Jerusalem's population was around 600,000, and yet within that city were two lay people who prayed to see the Messiah. Among all those people God saw them; God heard their prayers. Somehow both of them were drawn to the temple the day Jesus' parents brought him there. God directed both Simeon and a woman named Anna, one after the other, to the baby named Jesus.

Never underestimate the power of God. If you seek him, you will certainly be rewarded!

How did the Son of this massively powerful God who manifested himself in all kinds of power acts of nature enter the world? As a tiny, dependent baby. Now isn't that a change from the Old Testament?

You have this God of piercing power so great that people cannot even be in the presence of, and then He descends to us as a baby. That's shocking!

What are we to make of that?

It gives us **solace**. It gives us comfort in a troubled world. Solace means "comfort in sorrow, misfortune, or trouble; alleviation of distress or discomfort."

We live with the relentless darkness of the pandemic, with divisiveness and stress, and God sends a baby who also has to live in the midst of disease, divisiveness, and distress. He will have to be courageous: he will be abandoned, misunderstood, reviled, arrested, and crucified.

Jesus came as a baby but he has to fight a spiritual battle like a warrior. *The sword of faith*. We too have to have courage to seek his light and open ourselves to him:

- The struggle within ourselves to trust him
- To lay down our will to him
- To believe still, in the midst of difficult circumstances and losses

Jesus' sword is where we have to allow him to sever our self-will and self-determination.

C. S. Lewis said before he became a believer, everywhere he turned God's approach was unrelentingly. "When The Absolute arrived, he made a nuisance of himself!" he said, until Lewis finally gave in. He remembers the choice felt momentous. For the first time he examined himself seriously and found a depth of pride, self-admiration, lust, fears, hatreds so great that he wanted to shout at God, "KEEP OUT!" Belief in Jesus felt like giving himself blindly without assurance that the Spirit would be reasonable. When he submitted to the one who said "I am the Lord," Lewis called himself the most dejected, reluctant convert in all of England. After doing so he found that *the hardness of God is kinder than the softness of man*.¹

The sword of faith pierces our world of darkness with light, but it also pierces our own souls too.

There's another meaning of the word **Solace**, an ancient, now obsolete one. It means "pleasure, enjoyment, delight; entertainment, recreation, amusement." In a poem from the Middle Ages (1377) called "Piers Plowman" William Langland writes: "God in his goodness . . . set him in solace and in sovereign mirth." Solace has another meaning besides comfort in suffering. It also means to cheer and amuse.²

Let's think of God's willingness to give joy, cheer, a heart-felt laugh at the thought that our Almighty God who splits the rocks and breaks the mountains in two; who embodies all nature's powers and disasters, can appear as a cubby little baby boy.

What joy came to Simeon! What laughter filled his heart as he took that baby, filled with the courageous sword of faith, in his arms and kissed his cheek.

Where are you in faith? Are you resisting God's Spirit like the "before faith" C. S. Lewis? Or, have you relented and given your will to Jesus? We always have more steps to take on the journey of discipleship. The problems of our nation are not going to be solved by our own solutions or by weak faith. It takes the sword of faith and living in the light of God. The joy you find will depend on your decision to fully embrace his.

AMEN

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Mariner Books, 1955), 229.

² Stephen Miller, "Solace Is Golden, and Also Amusing," in Wall Street Journal, section A, January 27, 2021.