“Riffing on Simeon”

a sermon by

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First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

December 10, 2006

Text: “Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed and a sword will pierce your own soul too’” (Luke 2:34-35).

Several months ago I attended a Jewish wedding here in Charlotte at Temple Israel. It was a special occasion and I was impressed by the beautiful music and the splendor of the liturgy of the Jewish service. One of the things that I remember in particular was the sermon or “homily” that the Rabbi gave. In his homily he spoke of the marriage that took place between Adam and Eve and he described that beautiful ceremony in great detail. It was a night service and there were angel choirs present, and all the stars in the heavens shone brightly around this young couple as they made their promises to each other.

After the service one of the people in our party commented to me about the sermon and said that he did not remember that story about the wedding of Adam and Eve in the Bible. I explained that the story of the wedding of Adam and Eve was not in the Old Testament, but was probably part of the Midrash of the Old Testament, those stories and sayings of the Rabbis that formed a way of understanding the Old Testament. The Midrahim are a way of making ancient stories contemporary. They are a part of the religious imagination.

I.

This religious imagination is like what jazz musicians call a “riff.” A jazz player starts with the theme or the chords of a tune, then without departing from the structure they provide, creates an embellishment that remains true to the original. It is a fine art. A good riff neither replicates the original nor leaves it completely behind. Just after the birth narratives, Luke tucks in a marvelous example of just such a riff. This is religious imagination at work.

According to Luke’s gospel, Joseph and Mary bring their newborn son to the Temple to be circumcised according to the Jewish law. An elderly man by the name of Simeon is inspired

by the Holy Spirit to find them in the Temple so that they could bless the child. God had promised him that he would not die until he had laid his eyes on the Messiah. So Simeon takes the child Jesus in his arms and bestows a blessing on him that exceeded anything Mary and Joseph could have imagined. This child would not only be the liberator of Israel, but he would also be a light to the gentiles. Simeon goes on to warn Mary that a "sword will pierce her heart also."

The Simeon narrative is a perfect example of a religious riff, a creative extrapolation from a given theme. But it is more than that. Luke has carefully crafted the birth and infancy stories of Jesus as a way of preparing his readers for what lies ahead, and in that sense the story of Simeon tells us some very important things about this child Jesus.

II.

One is that this Jesus will divide his people. There are some like Simeon and Anna, the prophetess, who clearly see him as the Messiah. But others, Luke tells us, do not see it that way. Early on in his ministry the religious leaders of Israel turn against Jesus and are determined to be rid of him.

There is something about Jesus that has the capacity to stir people up in both a positive and a negative way. There are many people today who believe that religion is an evil force. They point to the excesses in Islam and in Christianity and conclude that the world would be a much better place without any religion.

And yet, religion has a remarkable capacity to make its way into our lives. Several months ago I came across a remarkable book by Harvey Cox, entitled *When Jesus Came to Harvard*. I confess that the title captured my imagination. It is really hard for me to imagine Jesus coming to any large university today—but Harvard!

The book was written out of an experience that Cox had as a member of the Divinity School faculty as well as the faculty of the college. As Cox explains it, over the last years the faculty of the college became very concerned about their graduates. The faculty was convinced that their students were being well educated in the sciences and the humanities, but they were concerned that the college was giving them virtually no preparation in how to apply their education. One of the great tragedies of the corporate scandals over the past several years—Enron, World Com, and others is that many of the CEO's of these companies were trained at some of the best business schools in America. Jeffrey Skilling of Enron, recently sentenced to prison for fraud, was a graduate of the Harvard Business School.

As a result of this concern, the university created a "division of moral reasoning." Harvey Cox taught a course he called "Jesus and the Moral Life." The last professor at Harvard that taught a class with Jesus as part of the subject matter had retired in 1912. Cox goes on to say that neither he nor any member of the faculty ever could have imagined the response to the class. It became the most popular class in the undergraduate curriculum, attracting over 800 students a year.

The students welcomed the chance to discuss issues that were alive to them, Cox said. The class used stories of the Bible as a way to focus students on moral answers to issues that concerned them, issues like money, paying off student loans, choices in relationships and marriage, sexual intimacy, peer pressure and the use of drugs.

Having taught the course for a number of years, Cox had this to say, "The worrisome thing today is the cynicism and resignation of students. They just don't believe that they can make a difference." He laments the loss of prophets like Daniel Berrigan, William Sloane Coffin, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

"We lost our idealism," he said, "no wonder kids aren't interested in mining the Christian tradition."

III.

There is something else in this "Song of Simeon." He speaks of Jesus as not only the "glory of the nation of Israel" but also as a "light to the gentiles."

That is a theme that occupies a great deal of Luke's gospel. From the beginning Jesus reaches out to those who are beyond the pale of the Jewish law. He eats with "sinners and tax collectors." He speaks of Jesus as a physician who reaches out not to the well but to the ill.

There is a special section in Luke's gospel (Luke 10-19) that is sometimes referred to as the "The Gospel of the Outcast." The stories that Luke tells in this section are not found in any other gospel: the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 29-37); the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-24; The Dishonest Steward (Luke 16:1-9); A Dishonest Tax Collector (Luke 19:1-10). In each of these stories Jesus speaks to the issue of the outcast, that is those who ordinarily would be viewed as outside the wall of religion: a profligate son, the hated Samaritan, a dishonest businessman, a corrupt tax collector by the name of Zaccheus.

Several years ago Erwin Duggan, a former President of the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), spoke to the Fall Convocation at Davidson College on the topic "All Things to All People." In that address Duggan reflected on his years at Davidson in the late 1950's and early 1960's. During that period Davidson was already beginning its flight from what many believed to be the pinching, limiting strictures of its Calvinist past. Like so many others, Duggan wanted the college to free itself from the embarrassing, suffocating embrace of its church relationship. He wanted the college to be a national institution able to hold its head up in the secular, pluralistic world of true higher education, not kneeling with bowed head, mumbling by rote the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

It was only years later, Duggan noted, that he realized that he was wrong, dead wrong about pluralism. Pluralism does not mean becoming like everybody else. It is about differences. Genuine pluralism does not ask people, or institutions, to suppress their individuality or their convictions so that they blend invisibly into the whole. This old Calvinist Davidson, Duggan noted, was making a genuine contribution to pluralism by refusing to be all things to all people.

Duggan went on to state that it was years later before he came to the realization that there is something called "religious truth." To be sure, Davidson College did not reject the scientific way of knowing and interpreting the world around. Like so many other schools, it trained physicians and scientists. The college also recognized the validity of an aesthetic way of knowing. That is why the college built fine arts buildings and encouraged the art department and the music department.

It was only later in his life, said Duggan, that he understood that there was a third way of knowledge, a religious way of knowledge. One of the most important teachings of the Judeo-Christian faith is the importance of individuals. It is what Luke emphasizes in his gospel. It affirms that every person is created in the image of God. It is the basis of our understanding of human rights. The ancient doctrine of Original Sin, for example, led James and John Adams to insist on the limitations of power and to create in our government a system of checks and balances. In fact, our modern notions of tolerance and pluralism owe much to great assertions of human universality like those of St. Paul: "I am persuaded that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female."

This religious way of knowing gave us the Sistine Chapel, the Divine Comedy of Dante, and the St. Matthew's Passion of J. S. Bach.

IV.

One of the characteristics of a musical riff is that it must be true to the original melody. A good riff neither duplicates the original nor leaves it behind. The same is true of the Jewish Midrash. It embellishes the stories of the Old Testament, but it does not abandon them. The Midrash seeks to find a contemporary relevance to an ancient text.

That is certainly true about the "Song of Simeon." As Harvey Cox points out, these university students were amazed at the great impact that Jesus has had even twenty centuries after his birth. The great liberator of India, Mahatma Gandhi, though not a Christian, based his life on the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount. Martin Luther King, Jr., founded the civil rights movement of the 1960s on the teachings of Christ and the prophetic witness of the Old Testament. Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, devoted herself to Jesus' pattern of poverty and simplicity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor whose determination to follow Jesus in Nazi Germany led him to join a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler and who was later hanged by the Gestapo at the death camp of Flossenburg.

All of these influential people had one thing in common. Each of them was trying to follow Jesus.

One wonders what might happen to our nation and our world if just a few people tried the same today.

Amen!