

Sermon: Piercing Inner Thoughts**Scripture: Luke 2:21-40****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: January 1, 2023**

This is a good passage for a New Year's Day as we now enter into 2023. It's the end of the birth narrative in Luke and it leaves us in a powerful way with this affirmation and promise that this child who has just been born is the awaited one, the Messiah, the Savior for all that needs saving in this world. Simeon's words are some of the most famous in all of scripture, sung and prayed across the world and known as the Nunc Dimittis which means in Latin "now you let depart". It has been sung in the evening prayers in monastic communities across the world and over the ages to close the day and sometimes it's sung after the receiving of communion or at funeral masses: Play Thomas Tallis

Now, Master, you let your servant depart in peace. You have fulfilled your promise.

My own eyes have seen your salvation,

which you have prepared in the sight of all peoples.

A light to bring the Gentiles from darkness; the glory of your people Israel.

It's a beautiful end to the birth story that this old man and old woman who had been devotedly awaiting and praying in the temple in Jerusalem for the coming Messiah, welcome Mary and Joseph and this month-old infant with joy and relief that finally, the one awaited for has arrived. But with the joy and excitement there is of course also the ominous edge of what lies ahead. Simeon says – "this child is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel and will be a sign that will be opposed by many because their inner thoughts will be revealed." And for sure if you are someone who goes around revealing people's inner thoughts and challenging them, it is not going to be an easy road for you. And if ever there

was a prophecy that was true of Jesus it was this. He told stories and had debates and encounters and did things that revealed people's inner thoughts especially the thoughts of those people whose outer appearance and presentation of themselves were admirable and righteous and religious, he was particularly fond of revealing their inner thoughts – remember at the pharisees house talking about how the guests chose their seating to be favored and privileged? And remember when the righteous men were about to stone a woman who they said had committed adultery and Jesus said “you who have not sinned may cast the first stone”. They walked away having had their inner thoughts revealed. And when Jesus heals the paralytic and tells him that his sins are forgiven and the people are thinking inwardly – that's blasphemous, he can't forgive sins – and Jesus says I know what you're thinking, what's easier to tell this man his sins are forgiven or to make him walk again. Take up your mat and show them. Again, inner thoughts revealed. And it goes on and on – Peter you'll betray me 3 times, no I won't, yes you will, no I won't. And he does. His inner thoughts revealed. Jesus knows them better than they know themselves. He knows us better than we know ourselves and it is dangerous business to awaken someone from their tidy delusions. We do not like that very much and will do most anything to maintain the illusion of ourselves.

So Simeon's words are ominous, to say the least. For this child will in fact be the cause of the rise and fall of many in Israel and reveal their inner thoughts. Then Simeon turns to Mary and says to her in the glow of her joy in her newborn son, he points to an inner thought lurking there in Mary's heart saying “and a sword shall pierce your soul as well.” She will suffer terribly, as any mother who has witnessed the suffering or death of her child can tell you. But she wondered,

she knew, with how this child came into the world claimed by God from the very beginning for God's purposes, she might have guessed that it would be a tough life to live, joyful and rich as well, no doubt, but tough too.

And that's the passage we are welcomed into the new year with. Our savior is here, the light brought to us gentiles so that we might know the beauty of relationship with the Creator God who was first revealed among the people of Israel. But the promise of that, the gift of that, comes as a two-edged sword. It's a beautiful thing but can involve facing honestly our inner thoughts that have been deceiving us and re-setting our broken-bone spirits that have us living only shadowed lives of how we could and ought to live. In the Spirit of the old adage, "be careful what you wish for", we could say, be careful how much you allow Jesus to be born anew in you if you are happy with exactly how things are in your life cause there's a sword that comes along with that precious Christ Child that can pierce our souls cause usually and in most cases our souls need some piercing so that they can be better filled with God's spirit.

What pierced your soul in 2022? How did that piercing open you up to God and God's spirit in a new and deeper way? I would be loath to say that God caused the thing that pierced your soul but it IS often soul-piercing experiences that open us up to God and God's purposes for us in ways we wouldn't have seen otherwise. Sometimes what we think is the worst thing is the thing that saves us which is in the end what Mary experienced and what we will all know one day in the soul piercing experience of being human. But we start here at the beginning of the New Year beside a manger. There will be time enough for the journey to the cross.