

Galatians 4:1-7

Luke 2:21-40

January 15, 2017

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

SWEET LITTLE JESUS BOY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Christmas Eve, John Forlaw sang “Sweet Little Jesus Boy” during our candle-light communion service. Along with Vera’s beautiful piano accompaniment, John’s rich voice painted a bittersweet picture of the baby Jesus.

*Sweet little Jesus Boy —
They made you be born in a manger.
Sweet little Holy Child —
Didn’t know who you were.
We didn’t know you’d come to save us, Lord;
To take our sins away.
Our eyes were blind, we couldn’t see,
and we didn’t know who you were.*

In his book, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the great British poet, painter, and printmaker, William Blake, wrote, “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to us as it is, infinite. For we have closed ourselves up, till we see all through the narrow chinks of our cavern.”

“Sweet Little Jesus Boy — we didn’t know who you were.”

Six weeks or so after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary took him to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate him to God, because they were good, faithful Jews. Who knows how many other couples were there that day to present their children to God? Someone has said, “No doubt many others saw [Joseph and Mary] and their child, but to them he was just another baby coming to be blessed by the temple priests. [But] Simon and Anna see more than meets the eye. They see a child clothed in garments of salvation and divinity in a little baby.”

Last weekend my family celebrated my mother’s 95th birthday in north Georgia. Cousins came from Washington state, New York City, and Dallas for the party. On Sunday morning, my sister and brother-in-law hosted a brunch at their house. About twenty of us visited for three hours and got caught up with each other. I hadn’t seen some of my cousins since 1990!

My sister had two big keeper boxes full of family photos for all of us to look at. We even tried to recreate some of the poses from when we cousins got together as kids. There were pictures of our grandparents and great-grandparents, pictures of our parents as children in the 1920’s and 1930’s, our school pictures and pictures of our weddings. I found my favorite school picture from 3rd grade — but then I found my least

favorite school picture from 9th grade! As we passed the pictures around, we told stories, reminisced, and strengthened and renewed our family ties. Since we are scattered across the United States, it was good to reconnect with family.

My cousin Anne, my niece Georgia, and her daughter Molly took lots of pictures at the birthday party on Saturday afternoon and during the Sunday brunch. This week they posted the pictures on FaceBook and in Dropbox. One of my favorites photos is of my six-month-old great-nephew, Blake, sitting in my 95-year-old mother's lap. My mom is looking at her great-grandson with great love. On the other hand, Blake is looking intently at the controls of her motorized wheelchair. It didn't take Blake long to figure out how to turn the chair on and, before my mom and the rest of us knew it, he had pushed the joystick and she went rolling across the living room floor!

As I looked at that picture of Mama and Blake, and then read the gospel story about the baby Jesus in the temple, I thought about how we don't have a big keeper box full of pictures and stories about sweet little Jesus boy. Three weeks ago we heard Luke's story about the shepherds visiting the newborn baby lying in the manger. Two weeks ago we heard about the wise men visiting the child and presenting their gifts. Today we hear about the baby getting circumcised and being named Jesus, and about Joseph and Mary dedicating him to God. Next Sunday we will hear a story about the 12-year-old Jesus listening to the teachers in the temple in Jerusalem and asking them questions. And that's all we know about the sweet little Jesus boy, until he turns 30 and begins his public ministry.

As much as we might wonder and speculate about what Jesus was like as a five-year old or a teenager . . . as much as we might wonder and speculate what it was like for Joseph and Mary to raise Jesus . . . as much as we might wonder and speculate what the neighbors in Nazareth thought about the carpenter's son as they watched him grow up along with their own kids — we just don't know who he was in those growing-up years.

But we do find out a lot about this sweet little Jesus boy in this gospel story that comes between the Christmas story and the beginning of Jesus' ministry. We find out that:

- * he was raised by faithful and observant Jewish parents, who were careful to do what the law required;

- * "he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." Borrowing from Matthew's Christmas story, we know that Joseph was to name him Jesus, "for he will save his people from their sins";

- * he was designated as holy to God;

- * he was the Lord's Messiah, which Mark tells us in the opening line of his own gospel — "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God";

- * he was God's "salvation" for all people, which is what the angel declared to the shepherds — "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah";

- * he was "a light for the Gentiles or nations, and for glory to God's people Israel."

Joseph and Mary may have already known all of that about their baby boy. After all, they had heard some pretty amazing things about Jesus from the shepherds and the wise men. However, they were still amazed at what Simeon said about their child. But then they heard more than they probably really wanted to know. Simeon held their child in his arms and said about him, “This child is destined for the falling and 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)

The footnotes in my study Bible comment, “Simeon’s second oracle sounds a prophetic warning. How the child is destined to cause *the falling and the rising of many* will become clear in the conflict between God’s saving purpose and human opposition to this sign.” As John sang on Christmas Eve,

*You have told us how, we are tryin’!
Master, you have showed us how,
even when you were dyin’.
Just seems like we can’t do right,
Look how we treated you.
But please, sir, forgive us, Lord —
We didn’t know who you were.*

Not only do we find out a lot about sweet little Jesus boy in this story, we also find out about Simeon and Anna. They were:

- * righteous and devout;
- * looking forward to the consolation, redemption, setting free, salvation of Israel;
- * guided by the Holy Spirit;
- * praising and worshiping God;
- * trusting in God’s promises and power.

That’s probably why Simeon and Anna saw the couple carrying their baby into the temple and knew who he was — God’s salvation for all people.

Yesterday our elders and I spent some time on retreat here at the church. We worshiped and prayed and studied God’s Word together. We talked a lot about the “why” of our congregation. What is most important? What is it that guides us in what we do and how we do it? Better yet, **who is it who** guides us in what we do and how we do it? Then we talked about how best to help our congregation keep our focus on God’s salvation in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit as we try to do what God is calling us to do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church.

In May 1860, Amherst W. Kellogg from Milwaukee, Wisconsin visited the Republican National Convention in Chicago, along with S.S. Daggett, the president of the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company, for which Mr. Kellogg worked. Daggett and Kellogg supported William Seward for president, and felt sure he would be nominated. However, they were ready to support whomever the convention nominated.

Abraham Lincoln was nominated by the Illinois delegation. New York favored Seward. Salmon P. Chase was supported by Ohio. Edward Bates was Missouri’s favor-

ite son and Pennsylvania presented Simon Cameron. No candidate received the necessary majority on the first ballot, but Seward was in the lead. Before the second ballot was cast, Cameron withdrew and his votes went to Lincoln, who now had almost as many votes as Seward. When the second ballot was counted, Lincoln was two votes short of the necessary number to be nominated. Just before the third ballot was about to be taken, a Mr. Cartter from the Ohio delegation got up and shouted, "Ohio changes four votes from Salmon P. Chase to Abraham Lincoln."

Mr. Kellogg said the crowd was so big, they were pressed together so that they could hardly move. Nevertheless, Mr. Daggett "danced up and down like a boy." A man standing near them, with tears streaming down his face, shouted, "I can't help it! I can't help it! I've been working for him a week and I didn't really hope for it." Nearby an old man shouted at the top of his voice, "Glory, Glory Hallelujah! Now Lord, lettest Thou thy servant depart in peace for mine eyes have seen the redemption of *Egypt*." (which is what the southern third of Illinois had been called)¹

That old man at the Republican National Convention obviously had high hopes for Abraham Lincoln as his party's nominee, since he quoted old man Simeon's words in the temple in Jerusalem. Simeon's song of praise is known as the "Nunc Dimittis," from the Latin for the first words, "Now you are dismissing . . ." The Nunc Dimittis has been used in daily evening prayers since the 4th century A.D. In a sense, as Simeon stood there in the temple that day and held God's salvation in his arms, he was saying, "Now I can die in peace, because I have seen God's promises of redemption and salvation for all people come true."

You might think John's solo on Christmas Eve was an old African-American spiritual. Actually, "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" was written in 1934 by Robert MacGimsey, a white man from Louisiana. He worked to preserve and make accessible African American folk music from the South. According to one source, Mr. MacGimsey wrote "Sweet Little Jesus Boy" after walking past crowded speakeasies in New York City during the Great Depression on Christmas Eve 1932. He described the song as picturing an aging black man whose life had been full of injustice "standing off in the middle of a field just giving his heart to Jesus in the stillness."²

Many artists have recorded this beautiful but haunting song. One music website notes that most recordings take liberties with the lyrics. When John sang the second verse on Christmas Eve, he said, "Long time ago, you were born, Born in that manger low, Sweet Little Jesus Boy. The world treated you mean, Lord, and it treats me mean too, But that's how things are down here — We didn't know who you were."

But there's another version with a different last line for that verse — "The world treated you mean, Lord, and it treats me mean too, But that's how things is down here — ***We don't know who you is.***"

Simeon and Anna see the Sweet Little Jesus Boy for who he really is — God's salvation for all people. The question is, do we look at this Sweet Little Jesus Boy and see him for who he really is? And, if we see him for who he really is, will we welcome him and live accordingly?

Let us pray: Restore to us the joy of your salvation, Lord. Grant in us a willing spirit to sustain us. Restore to us the joy of your salvation, Lord. Amen.

NOTES

¹Amherst W. Kellogg, "Personal Recollections of the Republican Convention of May, 1860," in *The Wisconsin Magazine of History, Volume 5*, www.books.google.com.

²Kevin DeYoung, "Sweet Little Jesus Boy," December 17, 2015 at www.blogs.thegospelcoalition.org.