

## 1 Christmas 1 – Luke 2:33-38

The church is identified by what she receives from her Lord. This is how she is the church. She receives his Word. She receives his Spirit. She receives his constant pledge of forgiveness, peace, comfort, and eternal salvation. Wherever you hear this precious gospel proclaimed and you see his sacraments handed out, then you can know that the church is there. You can know that God's saints are there. You can know that God's Spirit is creating and nurturing faith in mortal hearts.

Mary is a model of the church. She became the mother of God simply because of what she received. When she heard God's promise from the angel Gabriel that she would conceive and bear in her womb the Son of God, she believed it. She said, "Let it be to me according to thy Word." She didn't rely on her own merits and qualities. Instead, she rejoiced in God her Savior. She didn't hold precious her own thoughts. No, she treasured in her heart the gospel reported by the shepherds. With her husband she listened to Simeon's preaching, marveling that in this little baby the very glory revealed to Israel in ancient times now appears as light and salvation for all people. Her soul magnified the Lord who brought peace and good will to poor sinners. She pondered the great mystery that the almighty God of all would have compassion on those who aren't worthy of it. In the same way, the church lives on the promise of the gospel. The church bears in herself the Lord Jesus Christ by his Spirit and Word, his body and his blood. This is what identifies the church as the church.

The church is the church because of what she receives. She is cleansed of sin by the washing of water with the Word, satisfied by the body and blood of her Lord, and strengthened by the clear voice of the gospel. She receives what God gives. And Mary is a model of this. But there is another thing Mary receives, which the church receives with her. Simeon tell her that a sword would pierce through her own soul. Here he was describing the affliction Mary would have to bear in her heart when she witnessed her innocent Son suffer and die on a cross. St. John records that Mary sat at the foot of the cross watching her Child die in agony. Mary's suffering didn't save anyone. But God gave her this suffering to strengthen her faith. Just as she received from her Lord his own eternal Son, just as she kept in her heart his eternal gospel, so she would receive from him afflictions to test and prove her soul.

So it is for the church. We receive God's Word. We receive his Spirit, his favor, his pledge, his forgiveness, life, and salvation. We receive Christ. And we also receive from him various kinds of afflictions. Yet unlike the Word of God, unlike Christ, unlike his eternal Spirit, these afflictions are only light and for a moment. Mary's sorrow at the death of her Son was quickly turned to joy at his resurrection. And this was not just because she got her boy back. It was because his resurrection is the life, which the whole church receives.

The sword pierced through Mary's soul when her Son and Lord was mistreated, mocked, and killed. A sword pierces through our souls when we hear mocks against our Savior. When so called academic experts talk about Jesus as a myth or a legend, this troubles the souls of his saints. When Jesus is portrayed as just another moral teacher and not as God in the flesh who gave his life to save sinners, then this attacks our souls. When we must see how weak and unbelieving our sinful nature is, then this cuts to the heart.

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But even if the devil is throwing his spears at us, they have no power to pierce our souls. The afflictions are only temporary. The temptations don't last forever. God's Word, however, is what we receive eternally. His Word is what truly pierces through bone and marrow, dividing the soul from the spirit, revealing the ideas and intentions of every heart.

So what is really piercing your soul? Is it the mocking and scoffing of the unbelievers? Is it the sin and lust of your own flesh. Is it the false teaching that plagues the church? God allows these things only for a time just to test us. But what truly pierces our souls is God's Word, the sword of the Spirit. What pierced through Mary's soul wasn't the evil high priests or Pontus Pilate or the devil or anything in this world. What pierced through her soul was God's Word being fulfilled in her Son Jesus Christ. As Simeon said, he was destined to be the rising and falling of many in Israel. He was set up to be a sign to be spoken against. This child is the one who humbles us and exalts us. This little boy is the one whom the world opposes. It is because of him that the church can't find any peace or joy from this world. He is the spear that pierces our hearts. We have been baptized into his death. So whatever suffering we bear in this life we receive for his sake with the hope that God himself gives to us.

When we learn that being the church means receiving everything good from our Lord, then we learn to trust in him, to bear our cross with patience, and always rest in his humble and kind promise of salvation. Being the church is not about all the things we do. It isn't about how much we can fulfill the law or any other standard of holiness. It is about receiving what Mary received. It is about letting the Word of God penetrate our hearts and souls. We thereby receive confidence in our salvation and a true and faithful confession of our Savior.

And here you can see how the church is, in a way, identified by what she does. She confesses her Savior. She confesses the true doctrine of Christ. She speaks of his redemption to all people. Because when we confess Christ and his Word, we are simply testifying to what we have received.

This is why Mary isn't the only model for the church. We also hear of a woman named Anna. She came from a very unlikely tribe. The tribe of Asher goes virtually unmentioned after the Assyrians came and expelled the tribes of Israel. Only a few households from the tribe of Asher came down to Judah to celebrate the Passover with Hezekiah. They were almost completely forgotten after that. But Anna's parents, grandparents, and ancestors continued to receive God's Word. God preserved this little remnant.

Anna didn't preach in the synagogues or exercise authority over any assemblies. She simply confessed the gospel to anyone she saw. She stayed in the temple, praying and fasting, worshipping God. She was a pious woman who had been widowed at a young age and now was very old. God had given her a cross to bear, but she turned to his Word for comfort. She received whatever gift God gave her. So God gave her the gift of prophecy. Luke doesn't record exactly what she said about Jesus. He doesn't give any details about her prophecies. He simply says that she thanked God and spoke of him to all who were waiting for God's redemption. Anna is a model for the church. She waits for God to bless her, holding onto his Word. And she confesses what she has received. She tells people about Jesus Christ her Savior.

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The church has many members, but we all receive what God has given. Some he calls to be pastors and preachers of his Word. But he calls all people to confess this precious gospel in whatever station he has placed them. We have all received the adoption as sons. We have all been given the right to call God our Father through faith in Christ our Lord. We all proclaim what we have received. And when Christ is spoken against, then we are all together spoken against with him. His Word penetrates all our souls as we bear one another's burdens together, knowing that they are sent by the loving hand of God. Let us pray:

Our poor souls are now receiving –  
Faith has seen, and ears have heard –  
In Your sacraments and Word.  
Our meek hearts are now believing  
Every blessing from Your birth –  
God's good will and peace on earth.  
Jesus Christ, our blessed Savior,  
You revealed the Father's favor.  
Since You bore our sin and sadness,  
May we praise Your name with gladness.

We receive from Your bestowing:  
Pardon, peace, and heav'nly joy.  
Though the Tempter may annoy,  
We shall cling to what is flowing  
From Your piercé soul and side,  
Where we ever shall abide.  
Jesus Christ, our blessed Savior,  
You revealed the Father's favor.  
Since You bore our sin and sadness,  
May we praise Your name with gladness. Amen.