

## Bound For Glory<sup>i</sup>

Scripture: Luke 2:22-25

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Leslie R. Stacks at the First Presbyterian Church of Wadesboro.

Riding on the City of New Orleans,  
Illinois Central Monday morning rail,  
Fifteen cars and fifteen restless riders,  
Three conductors and twenty-five sacks of mail.  
All along the southbound odyssey,  
The train pulls out at Kankakee,  
Rolls along past houses, farms, and fields.  
Passin' towns that have no names,  
Freight yards full of old black men,  
And the graveyards of the rusted automobiles.  
Good morning, America, how are you?  
Don't you know me? I'm your native son.  
I'm the train they call *The City of New Orleans*;  
I'll be gone 500 miles when the day is done.<sup>ii</sup>

This song, made famous by Arlo Guthrie, is about a passing way of life, a passing time in our nation's history. When Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, this song struck a new chord as people asked whether their way of life, whether a whole region of our country, could ever be the same. Arlo Guthrie is the son of the great Depression-era balladeer Woody Guthrie, whose songs asked those same questions at another time when weather devastated our country: the 1930s Dust Bowl. Then, too, as John Steinbeck wrote, people were forced to leave everything behind:

from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas, families, tribes, dusted out, tracted out. Car-loads, caravans, homeless and hungry; twenty thousand and fifty thousand and a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. They streamed over the mountains, hungry and restless — restless as ants, scurrying to find work to do — to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut — anything, any burden to bear, for food. The kids are hungry. We got no place to live. Like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land.<sup>iii</sup>

It is easy to tell ourselves that events such as the Dust Bowl, Hurricane Katrina, and the intense drought, heat, and wildfires that plagued Texas and Oklahoma this past summer have no bearing on our lives. Perhaps none of us have lost our homes, lost our livelihoods, or seen our way of life diminished by what the weather has brought — or taken away. Why should we care about or concern ourselves with people we do not know and are unlikely ever to meet?

We now are in the middle of Christmas, the 12-day commemoration of the birth of Jesus. It is a time for joy, a time for celebration — and rightly so — but it also is a time for remembering just how it is that God was incarnate, just how it is that God came to earth, took on human flesh, and lived among ordinary folk. It is a time for remembering just how it is that God gave the world his only son — and why. It all began, as we know, in a stable. It was probably more of a cave, really, a space carved out of rock with just enough room for the few animals it was meant to house. Jesus was born in that cave because Mary and Joseph — like families displaced by the Dust Bowl, by Hurricane Katrina, by wildfires — had to be away from home. And, that would not be the end of their travels. Not long after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph would take their baby and flee into Egypt, to live as refugees until they knew that King Herod had died and it was safe for them to return. But in the time in between — between Jesus' birth and his family's migration into Egypt — there was a trip to Jerusalem. That trip provides the subject of our scripture reading for this morning. Let us listen for

the word of God.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, “Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord”), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 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.”

Picture yourself holding your firstborn child, an infant not yet six weeks old. He has his fist in his mouth, sucking and drooling, his gaze fixed on you as he awaits the comforting sound of your voice. Carefully you hold his head as you enter the temple, to keep it from lolling about as you walk along. You are gazing around in awe at that enormous, sacred building, when a man appears. This stranger reaches out and takes your precious child into his arms. Without even knowing why, you let him, only to see the man’s face glow with happiness as he begins to pray, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

If you are Mary, this probably brings to mind the words an angel spoke to you nearly a year ago: that you would bear a son who “will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High” and who “will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”<sup>iv</sup> If you are Joseph, you probably are recalling the angel who came to you, telling you that Mary would bear a son conceived from the Holy Spirit, a son who “will save his people from their sins.”<sup>v</sup> Neither of you truly understood what those angels told you, and you certainly do not know what to make of the things this man is telling you now: that your 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 then there is that final, most cryptic declaration to Mary: “a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

As the parents of this baby, it is hard to know if this man, Simeon, has delivered to you a blessing or a curse. Clearly, he is overjoyed. Simeon had always believed Isaiah’s prophecy that someday God would bring comfort to the people of Israel.<sup>vi</sup> He had always believed that he, himself, would see the Messiah before dying. But Simeon also had the spiritual wisdom to know that when the Messiah did arrive, his coming would be fraught with controversy, with turmoil, with pain. It is always that way when everything we know, everything we believe, everything we have ever understood about life is turned upside down. And Jesus the Messiah did turn everything upside down — even before he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves.<sup>vii</sup> Jesus’ very birth — taking place, as it did, in a crude stable instead of a palace — Jesus’ very birth signaled that everything the world believed about justice and power and religion was about to be set on its ear. We hear that message within Simeon’s prayer.

At the very beginning, Simeon declares that God has prepared his salvation “in the presence of all peoples.” Although this salvation would bring glory to God’s original chosen people — to Israel

— that glory would not be for Israel, alone, but would go out to the Gentiles and all the world. It is hard for us to comprehend what a truly scandalous statement this was. After all, we are the Gentiles, the people born outside of Judaism. We do not think it outrageous or even odd that God would reveal himself and give his salvation to us. Perhaps we will get the point if we substitute the word “Gentiles” with “atheists” or “terrorists,” or some other group we believe God would find abhorrent and beyond his grace. When Simeon looked at this baby, he saw a Messiah who would shower God's love and God's grace upon atheists, terrorists, torturers, and thieves, upon Samaritans who rejected the God of Israel and upon beggars out on the streets. Simeon saw in Jesus someone who would accept perfume from a prostitute, but berate as a hypocrite a man who stood in the synagogue to pray.<sup>viii</sup> Who would condemn the nation's leaders while embracing the people society cast out. No wonder Simeon said that Jesus would “be a sign that will be opposed.” Simeon recognized that this baby, this Messiah, had come to disclose our innermost thoughts and force each one of us to choose between his way — God's way — and the way of the world. Simeon knew that not even Jesus' own mother could escape the crisis of that decision, a decision that would wound her very soul.

That is the future this baby, this Jesus, had before him. As Simeon declared, that future was the path to glory — for the Gentiles, for Israel, for all of humanity. It is a path that Christ now invites us to walk with him, but from the prayer of Simeon we learn that it will not be a casual stroll. Along the way, God will call us to care about and concern ourselves with people we do not know and are unlikely ever to meet. Christ will call us to shower God's love and God's grace upon atheists, terrorists, torturers, and thieves, upon people who openly reject God and upon beggars out on the streets. Sometimes our Lord will call us to condemn our nation's leaders, and always he will expect us to embrace the people the rest of society has cast out. Such is the path to glory.

A few months after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, Arlo Guthrie took his daughter and son and a bunch of their colleagues on a 12-day ride on the 926-mile route of *The City of New Orleans* train. The trip normally takes 19 hours, but they made several stops along the way to raise funds and awareness for a particular group of people displaced by Hurricane Katrina: the musicians of the Gulf Coast who lost their homes, their equipment, and the places where they once had worked. To explain why he was making such an effort instead of just writing a check, Guthrie said, “I'd much prefer to be lazy; that's more in my nature. . . . But I grew up in a family with values that said you can't just sing about things. Anybody can sing and talk. You have to actually do stuff. Sometimes you have to act without waiting to understand. . . . Love now. Live now. Serve now. Do it now.” With that said, Guthrie, his daughter Sarah Lee, and his son Abe began to sing, “This train is bound for glory.” Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Bound for Glory is the title of the autobiography of Woody Guthrie, originally copyrighted in 1943 and still in publication.

<sup>ii</sup> Steve Goodman, *The City of New Orleans* ©1970, 1971 EMI U Catalogue, Inc. and Turnpike Tom Music (ASCAP)

<sup>iii</sup> John Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath, New York, NY (Viking Critical Library), 1972, p. 317 (originally published in 1939)

<sup>iv</sup> Luke 1:32-33

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 1:21

<sup>vi</sup> Isaiah 40:1

<sup>vii</sup> See Matthew 21:12, Mark 11:15, and John 2:15.

<sup>viii</sup> Matthew 6:5