

Good news and bad news

By [Thomas R. Steagald](#)

December 23, 2008

The good news is not, of course, good news for everyone.

It surely is for the hungry, for those in the valley and for the bruised and broken earth. The psalmist calls the world and all in it to praise God's work of creation and re-creation, and not only God's *people*, but every single thing that has languished under the crushing burden of human sin and indifference.

But more than a few mouths will be clamped shut. Not everyone *wants* to sing praise for this news—not those who prosper by others' poverty nor those who prefer crooked paths to straight ones. Those who love the dark world just as it is will rage at the new fanfare, and chief among the dissenters will be the "rulers of the earth." (While they too are invited to join the descant, this may be *pro forma*, so that they are without excuse when all is set right.)

In short, the coming of the Messiah is good news and also very bad news, a sword with two sharp edges. It's a reason for rejoicing and for weeping. We see this in Simeon and Anna, the Nativity's odd couple. Anna was, well, unusual—most 84-year-old women do not spend all their time at the temple, praying and fasting. And although the text does not tell us Simeon's age or where he spent his time, he too was unusual, focused as he was on "looking forward to the consolation of Israel."

Simeon may have been a young idealist who stayed mostly away from the temple, distrusting those who had long since lost their own idealism—who were not looking for the consolation of Israel at all but simply for a way to survive. Perhaps the temple priests distrusted him, too—dismissed him—because they considered him a fanatic. After all, "the Holy Spirit rested on him," and that's always trouble for religious professionals.

Did Simeon come to the temple only on that day, urged or driven by the same spirit that kept Anna there day and night? Or was he too there every day, not praying and

fasting, but scrutinizing all the new parents and babies and making everybody nervous?

I wonder whether Anna and Simeon knew each other. She was a wizened and fearless prophetess, and, if he was a young idealist, then together they may be the chiastic face of [Psalm 148:12](#).

What we know for sure is that today there is both praise and warning, both joy and dread. Jesus is born, yet by this time in the liturgical calendar, Stephen is already dead. A sword will pierce Mary and all who love Jesus, as it will Jesus himself. But in the prescribed time—according to the calendar and promises of God—the world will be purified by Jesus' coming.