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The Sword of Christmas

Recently, some friends told me that they are expecting their first child, and it's always noticeable, isn't it? The special excitement and the buzz for the couple and extended family when they're about to have a firstborn. You've all seen the reaction of a couple's parents when, say, this couple that's expecting their first child goes to announce to their parents that they're having a child. When the parents first learn that they're going to be grandparents, they're just overjoyed. Or perhaps it's siblings who learn that they're going to be an uncle and an auntie for the first time. It's beautiful to celebrate new life.

But something also about newborns that men quickly realize, so I'm told, is that certainly in God's special design, a mother is far more deeply attuned to the needs of a child than any man is. There's a poem I came across that reads this way: "A mother's love is something that no one can explain. It is made of deep devotion and sacrifice and pain. It is endless and unselfish and enduring, come what may, a many splendid miracle man cannot understand and another wondrous evidence of God's tender guiding hand."

May we not forget that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, was born as any man, just like us, a helpless babe. And may we also not forget that Mary, as any mother, deeply loved Jesus, and perhaps more than any other, given her unique son. Mary has undoubtedly been on an immense rollercoaster of a journey leading up to the point where she gives birth to Christ. Angelic messengers have told her, though she is not yet married and only engaged, that she is God's chosen vessel to birth the Messiah into the world. She faces the potential scorn of others who would recognize that Mary fell pregnant while she was only yet betrothed to Joseph and not yet married to him. For who would ever believe her that, in fact, the child in her was conceived of God's miraculous power?

But at last, Mary holds the child of promise. She does not yet understand exactly what he, Jesus, will turn out to be, but she is still nursing at her breast. She is rocking him to sleep; she is attending to his cries in the night, the Son of God. But Mary's great love for her

newborn will mean that because of who Jesus was and what he came to achieve, Mary herself would feel the pain of losing Jesus, perhaps more than any other alive at the time. For she will have to watch her son die, something no mother could hardly bear.

This is exactly what this passage here this morning is telling us. So the title of my message is "The Sword of Christmas." We note that Simeon said that a sword will pierce through your own soul as well to Mary. You see, this Christmas passage tells us that the shadow of the cross was cast over Jesus even as a baby, and that to Mary, such pain to her heart at witnessing Jesus die would be as if a sword was piercing through her heart. Such would be her grief.

Now, in the context of the passage here, Joseph and Mary, on the eighth day, have taken their newborn Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to fulfill the requirement of the law concerning newborn Jewish males. And so it's here, while in the temple in Jerusalem performing the customs of the law, that they encounter the central character of our section, which is an old man by the name of Simeon. Luke tells us about Simeon's character and his conviction. We read there in verse 25, "And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him."

You see, Simeon was a man of God who, by faith, believed that one day God would make good on his promise made to his people that the Messiah would come into the world. The text tells us that the Spirit of God revealed to Simeon that the child brought into the temple by Joseph and Mary was the child that he was waiting for. And so, taking Jesus into his arms, in verse 29, he says, "Now, Lord, you are releasing your bond servant to depart 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 of revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel."

And so, through Simeon, the Lord reveals even in Jesus' infancy that the child himself is the sign of God's salvation. Not only will he be salvation for the Jews, for Israel, but even for the world. Jesus' birth is of international significance. This brings us to Luke 2:34-35, where there are three prophetic predictions that Simeon makes about the birth of Jesus, which communicate to us this morning the message of Christmas. So let's work briefly through these three points.

The first point that Simeon makes is this: Christ is the appointed sign. Jesus is the one who has been appointed, that is, appointed by God for the rise and fall of many, he says, and is one who will be opposed. Again, in verse 34, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be spoken against."

Now, this may sound like a rather shocking thing to be reminded of at Christmas. You see, at Christmas, we do everything we can to ensure this is a peaceable time, don't we? Everyone is to be on their best behavior today. All the children have to be under control—enough sugar to keep them happy but not too much that the crash comes later in the afternoon and

everyone's grumpy and upset. We all want to have a wonderful, splendid time. But you see, it's interesting because at the heart of Christmas, when we turn to consider the Christ of Christmas, we actually find a message promised of division, not of a peaceable time as we all want.

We find a message about a child who would be scorned, hated, and ridiculed, and whose followers and whose church, as Jesus himself, would be assailed like a city on a hill. There would be those who would, because of him, be divided. Whatever kind of Christmas cheer is this? But friends, this is just what we need to understand about Jesus. The scripture foretold that such would occur when the Messiah came. Jesus Christ is the one over whom all peoples from Adam forward shall divide over in the eternal, ultimate sense.

People are divided over all manner of issues, even down to petty things like whether you drive a Ford or a Holden. But when it comes down to it, all that really matters is on which side of Christ that we fall. The Apostle Peter, in his first epistle, put it this way: he stated that Christ is a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense. So where do you sit in relation to Christ this morning? Do you oppose God's sign of salvation? Perhaps you don't think that Christ is of any relevance to you. Perhaps you think faith in God and following Jesus are for weak-minded people. You might be offended by the idea that you're a sinner and require Christ to be saved. In this way, Jesus becomes to such a person a rock of offense.

But perhaps you're not so much offended by Christ; rather, you've simply stumbled over him and carried on. You've been walking along and you've come across this message of the gospel, but it's only as if you've tripped on an object in your path and you've simply carried on your merry way, neither caring to pause to consider Jesus without any thought of eternal things. You see, people like this are focused on no more than the next weekend, the next holiday, going about their lives deliberately ignoring the frightful state of their soul, not even bothering to turn around and again consider the rock who is Christ.

But perhaps, and I pray so this morning, Christ is not a rock of offense. He's not a rock that you've stumbled over; rather, Christ will be to you this Christmas the rock which you will cling to through the storms of judgment to come. Perhaps you will confess to God you are a sinner and plead with God that Christ may stay your hand, that you may cling to him, that the judgment might pass and you would be found saved and secured in him. Perhaps instead of falling over him, as Simeon predicted, instead you will be raised to life by him. Christ, you see, is a sign to be opposed, appointed for the rise and fall of many.

Our second heading is this: Christ was born to die. This is the second thing Simeon foresees as he predicts the death of the child Christ, and Simeon does this in the most alarming way. He says to Mary, this loving, cherishing mother, who we read a number of times in Luke was pondering and treasuring in her heart all these things concerning Jesus, that a sword is going to pierce her soul—not a real sword, but the sword of pain, the sword of despair, as she will watch Jesus die upon the cross.

Simeon is saying that Mary would have to watch her dear and only son die, and it would be like any mother as if a sword had pierced her through. Such is a mother's love for a son, and such is the grief that she would bear when she, along with several women, stood at the foot of Jesus' cross and watched as he was crucified. That moment itself is recorded in John's gospel in this way: "But standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Cleopas, and Mary Magdalene." We do not need to read of Mary's tears to know that they flowed. We do not need to hear her words to know that she grieved. We do not need to hear her wailing to know that she went into mourning. Grief would have overtaken Mary; this was torturous for her to bear.

But you see, the death of Jesus is the very reason why many take offense and stumble over him. To the one who takes offense at Jesus' cross, they reject the idea that sins must be atoned for in order that man may come to God. They reject the notion that in the death of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, the Lamb without blemish or fault, in him has revealed our utter depravity. That all of us, that for our souls to be redeemed from hell, one of infinite moral worth had to die to so bear the punishment in our place. This message to the world is offense; it is stumbling; it is foolishness. But to the one who stumbles over Christ, he is like the Jews of Jesus' day who mock the idea that not only did God assume and take on human flesh, but mock the idea that it was the Messiah's destiny to die and to be cut off.

Yet this was God's will that by looking upon him whose destiny it was to go from the manger to the cross, we might know the healing power that is in Christ and the forgiveness of sins that is found in him through it. In 1 Peter 3:18, it says, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." So Christ was born to die.

A third and very brief final point: Christ reveals man's heart. This Christmas, we see here again in verse 35, "And a sword will pierce even your own soul to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." What does the message of the manger and the message of the cross reveal in your heart this morning? Does it reveal rebellion or rejoicing? Does it reveal worry? Does it reveal worship? Does it reveal rejection? Does it reveal repentance?

May our response, may that which is revealed in our hearts, learning about the manger, learning about the cross, may it be as Simeon responded to Christ. Charles Spurgeon said of Simeon, "He takes him up in his arms; he clasps him to his heart; he rejoices over him; he is ready to die with delight now that he has found Christ." And that's what it's all about, isn't it, friends? Christ comes that we might delight in him and find life and eternal joy in his name through the work he has accomplished.

And how do we receive this amazing gift of Christmas? But by faith and belief in him, that he was who he is, he has lived for us, he has died for us, he has been raised for us. He is the preeminent one, the firstborn of all creation, the one who comes into the world, God incarnate, to live and to save his people. And that's why Christmas is worth rejoicing over, and that's why it is this day that we desire to worship.

Let's give thanks.

