

A Sword For The Soul

by Steve Zeisler

We had a short-lived debate at our house earlier this month. When we bought our Christmas tree, the suggestion was briefly made that perhaps we could put up the Christmas tree in a different place than in other years. A cry of outrage went up from the children, "How could you think of such a thing? The Christmas tree goes where the Christmas tree goes!" The notion that it might go somewhere else was not to be entertained.

Traditions are important to us, and this is the most traditional of all seasons. As a culture, we love change, newness and modernity, but not at Christmas. Innovation is the last thing anyone wants at Christmas. We want memories, not surprises. This is a season when rural America is glorified--woods covered with snow, log cabins and old fireplaces. Old-country ethnic traditions are brought to the fore even among people who do not claim their ethnic heritage at any other time. Modern department stores and shopping malls make every effort to look like the London of Charles Dickens' times. What is old, what is memorable and what is traditional are the things highlighted during this season. There is a universal desire to see the best things about human relationships captured and the memories of the best times in our childhood held high.

Christians and non-Christians alike lament the encroachment of greed, speed and commercialism--destroying the warmth of Christmas found in the closeness and delight of family times. Yet, despite the lament, most of us experience disappointment in our attempts to rescue Christmas. There is more hunger than satisfaction. Memories far outshine our present condition. Most people, if they are honest, experience some disappointment in themselves and in their circumstances precisely because they want Christmas to mean so much.

I would like to talk about rescuing Christmas--rescuing the traditions, the family desires, the love of one another in human fellowship, and the concern for what is right and good. The Christmas spirit, apart from the love of Christ, is a pale, weak and disappointing source of hope. In fact, we cannot gain the experience we long for at Christmas if we aim at it for its own sake. If we try our best to love with all our heart the people closest to us and to hold high the values that Christmas brings to our minds, we are most likely to be disappointed. But if we give Jesus Christ the central place in our lives this season, begin to understand what God did in the incarnation and desire a deeper worship of him, then Christ will grant us, as a gift, all the joy we associate with Christmas.

I would like you to turn to the book of Luke. We are going to return to the source of the celebration to gain an understanding of the Christmas event. The first two chapters of Luke's gospel record a tale of two babies. The accounts of the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus the Messiah are entwined. In fact, I think it is useful to examine them alongside of each other, especially in our desire to understand Christmas.

The birth of John is most like the kind of family Christmas we hope to experience. His birth took place at home. During the delivery, his mother was surrounded by husband, friends and family--people rejoicing with her. Even as her pregnancy became obvious, Elizabeth experienced more and more honor and had the appreciation of the people around her. Since she had been barren for many years, everyone rejoiced that God had taken away her disgrace. Luke 1:58 records: "And her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her." Elizabeth was able to delight in the pregnancy and in the birth of her son. It was a time of wonder, a time for family closeness, a time for singing. We are even told the funny, human experience of naming the new baby. John's birth brought honor to his mother, joy to the community, and the gathering of the family--all of the things that we hope Christmas will produce for most of us.

On the other hand, the birth of Jesus is most like the Christmas experiences which we do not like. How many people enjoy being in crowded shopping malls? How many people look forward to the crush of grim-faced people in the crowds? Jesus was born in a city that was so crowded a woman in labor could find no place to lie

down to have her child except where the animals were kept. Grim-faced crowds forced by the circumstances of the day to be where they did not want to be, denied space to this young woman in need.

Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem because of the rampant materialism of Rome which was greedy for as much money as it could wring from its people. The government ordered each family to return to its place of origin for a census to facilitate taxation. It was for money's sake that Mary and Joseph were where they were. Many of us feel that this season has been taken over by the forces and ideas of the materialistic world in which we live.

We often experience frenetic travel schedules around Christmas. Every effort is made to get somewhere fast. As a result, everyone is in the airport at the same time, elbowing one another out of the way while their reservations are falling through. This same crushing experience of traveling stands out in the accounts of Jesus' birth. The demands of travel came upon his parents at the end of Mary's pregnancy. Thus, they had to leave their hometown to travel under difficult circumstances to an unwelcoming city.

The contrast between these two birth accounts is striking. John was born in the happiest of human experiences; Jesus was born in some of the most difficult. Elizabeth's pregnancy was an honor to her; Mary's pregnancy was a disgrace, occurring before her marriage to Joseph. Elizabeth was allowed her relatives and friends attending her at childbirth; Mary was sent wave after wave of strangers--shepherds whom she did not know, wise men from the East, and Simeon and Anna, the peculiar elderly people in the temple. The very things we want to resist in modern Western Christmases are the same experiences Mary and Joseph faced at the original Christmas.

We are told that after the shepherds came, Mary and Joseph marveled at what was happening to them. Mary "treasured" the memories in her heart. In fact, Luke's record of these events certainly came from Mary's memory. He must have interviewed her to get the information for his gospel. As Mary talked to Dr. Luke, she could recall the questioning, wonder and uncertainty--the deep ponderings about the events as they unfolded before her.

In one of the greatest moments of human history, Mary stood before the angel Gabriel who told her of God's intention and said, "Be it done unto me as you have said." But what did she expect to happen? I am sure she did not expect the events to turn out as they did--so difficult, so surprising, so threatening. The baby would be born, but under these circumstances? She surely had to wonder about the nature of the first Christmas and what it meant to her. I want to suggest that we need to think along these lines as well. As much as we are emotionally caught up in the season, we need to ask some questions about the purpose of this baby's birth.

In Luke 2:25-35, a prediction is given to Mary soon after the birth of the baby which will help us to understand:

And behold, 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. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, "Now Lord, Thou hast let Thy bond--servant depart, in peace, according to Thy word; for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel." And His father and mother were amazed at the things which were being said about Him. And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed_ and a sword will pierce even your own soul--to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

In the midst of her amazement and questioning, Mary had a pointed prophecy made for her. "This baby's life will be the reason for the fall and rise of many in Israel," said Simeon. And then to Mary, he said, "A sword will pierce your soul as well." On the basis of the context we have developed so far, I want to suggest what I think Simeon meant when he said this to Mary. There is a desire in all of us to have the best of human

closeness at Christmas, and yet, as I said before, if we aim at this without giving Jesus Christ the place he deserves, we are likely to lose what we want. This is precisely the soul's surgery that Simeon predicted for Mary which would allow her to put her own son in the proper place in her life and to receive the blessing that he would give. We need to learn the same lessons. When we are rightly related to Christ, then we are in position to be given as a gift the warmth of family fellowship, the joy of giving, and the freedom from materialism. When we have Christ in the correct position in our lives, then we can experience what we have desired all along.

What was the sword that would pierce Mary's soul? What was the hard lesson she would have to learn? I think Mary's lifelong difficulty was learning to let the world have her baby. She was Jesus' mother, yet she was going to be required by the Lord God to become his disciple, to become an obedient follower of her own son. She would have to learn from his lips and by his actions to treat him as her Lord, not as her boy. She would have to give the heavenly Father the right to sacrifice her son for the world, to invest his life in the lives of others all over the world. She could not keep him for herself. She had to be willing to give up her son to the world who needed him. Her ponderings must have included, "This is my baby. Who are these people who are encroaching upon our lives?" I think this was Mary's great struggle, and we see it reflected in various places in the gospels.

Think about parenting and the whole range of experiences associated with it. I have two sets of close friends who are at opposite ends of the parenting process. One couple just experienced their first birth while the other couple just watched their last child go off to college this Fall. It has been fun to watch both couples, as well as to observe myself. Parents' lives are wrapped up in the lives of their children. They have an attachment to their own children that is not like any other kind of relationship. The new, first--time father of twin daughters was telling me that while they were taking La Maze classes in preparation he was asked by the teacher to pretend he was a uterus--contracting and expanding on schedule. He thought it funny (and it has continued to strike me funny ever since) that this would be part of a parent's preparation for birth. But the whole process is magnificent -- the preparation, the anticipation, and the arrival. The earliest months of both uterine development and birth are a great stage of life to experience as a first--time parent. My other friends who sent the youngest of their children off to college are experiencing what is called the "empty nest." They are learning how to continue to be parents, yet be less responsible, less present, and less actively involved. This is the last stage of the long process of parenting.

My own situation is probably right in the middle. Our children have not been babies for some years now, but they are not ready to leave yet. This Fall, I experienced the strong emotional reaction of a parent protecting his child while coaching my nine--year--old son's soccer team. Through a crazy series of events, including a villainous referee among other things, my son was reduced to pain--filled tears, accused of something he did not do. He almost hurt physically because he felt so badly about himself. As I went through the cycle of trying to protect him and wanting to strike back, I realized that I am tremendously caught up in the life of this boy.

You can probably think of many stages of parenting from imitating a uterus to seeing your children go to college, from teaching them to walk to teaching them to drive. In any and all of these stages, you can imagine some of what Mary went through as a mother. The first time she felt the baby kick, when she realized he was moving, she prayed the prayers expressed by every mother for the child developing inside her. Mary nursed her son and held his hand. Yet, as she watched him grow up, she knew the sword would pierce her soul some day when the heavenly father would say, "No, you cannot have him for yourself. You can't even be special in your relationship to him." He could not remain her child. He was born for the sake of the world, not for the sake of Mary and Joseph's family. In the long run, Mary was offered a chance to be his follower in the same way that all of us are offered that chance. But she had to be willing to accept that kind of relationship with her own son. Jesus, we sing, is "Lord at his birth." From the first day, he was Lord, even of his mother.

Jesus himself reminded Mary of how theirs would not be a normal mother--son relationship. Consider some of the statements he made. For example, when he was 12, he went with his parents to Jerusalem, but he stayed when they left. Frantically looking for him, they found him in the temple. His mother asked him, "What do you think you are doing?" And he looked at her with perfect innocence and said, "Don't you know? I must be in my father's house." Again, Mary treasured this response in her heart, wondering and wishing she could understand what was becoming of her boy. At the end of his life, with his last breath, Jesus said to Mary, "I

have another son for you. I cannot be who you want me to be. John, this is your mother. Mother, this is your son." He gave her the apostle John in his place because he had been taken from her over the years and ultimately in his death.

In Mark 3:31-35, we have the record of another incident:

And His mother and His brothers arrived, and standing outside they sent word to Him and called Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him and they said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are outside looking for You." And answering them, He said, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" And looking about on those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold, My mother, and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.'

What do you think Mary thought when she heard her son say these things? Jesus said anyone who does the will of God is his mother and brother and sister--these are the people in right relationship to him. He said, "It is no special advantage to have been a physical member of my family." In the long run, in the presence of God incarnate in Christ, the same announcement is made to everyone: "Will you be reconciled to God? And having been reconciled, will you obey?" It must have been hard for his mother to stand outside and hear him speak these things.

Do you remember the wedding feast at Cana? Being, perhaps, relatives of the family, Jesus and his mother were invited. When the wine began to run out, Mary, a typical Jewish mother, bustled about to save the party. She came to her son and said, "Do something about it!" In effect, he replied, "That is your concern, not mine." He said it lovingly for he never ceased to love and respect his mother, but he made his point, "I am not going to be the eldest son, the head of the house in my father's stead. I am not in a position to take orders from you concerning this party. This is not the role I am going to play in your life any more." His answer and his ministry both reinforced the relationship he would have with his mother, "I am not going to be the son upon whom you can count in this kind of a social circumstance."

Luke 11:27-28 records Jesus' words at another time:

And it came about while He said these things, one of the women in the crowd raised her voice, and said to Him, "Blessed is the womb that bore You, and the breasts at which You nursed." But He said, "On the contrary, blessed are those who hear the word of God, and observe it."

If Mary heard this statement, what could it have meant to her? He said, "On the contrary, it is of no particular, special advantage to have been my mother. The people who are advantaged in their relationship to me are those who hear the word of God and observe it." Mary was given the same invitation to this relationship that everyone else received. When Elizabeth had her baby, she did not have to share him with all the world from the first day. She did not have strange shepherds trotting in to adore John. She did not have visitors from somewhere in the East following a star to come to worship her child. She did not have people taking him from her arms in the temple and singing hymns to him. She did to have the rest of the world dominating the life of her boy. But Mary did.

We can imagine that in the same way that we want Christmas to be a time of family warmth and closeness filled with tradition and "yuletide carols being sung by a fire," Mary must have wanted a normal relationship with her son. She wanted to be his mother and to have the special relationship that only mothers can have with their sons. But as Simeon predicted from the beginning and as her own pondering must have led her to believe, "A sword will pierce your soul. This one will cause you to face something that will be painful and necessary surgery." like Mary, we often want Jesus' birth to be a warm human event and nothing more than that. We want the human experience of Christmas to transcend everything else. Like Mary, we want all the closeness that a small child might share with its mother. We want our families to draw close at Christmas.

But Mary came to relate to Jesus by the end of his life as the Messiah who had been sent to her people. She would follow him because he was the Lord. We need to make the same kind of decision about Christmas for ourselves. We must confront this baby for who he is, the Creator--God of all the universe who became

incarnate. He is the one whom angels adore and whom the cosmos obeys. He is the one who has the right to command us as well as the mercy and the heart to love us. He is the one we have to choose to worship. The song says, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." The longing of the human race found its answer in Jesus Christ. He was more than just a baby born in a manger surrounded by wonderful, loving music. He called us to worship him, "Oh come let us adore him." This is the proper note for our Christmas.

We need to make a deliberate choice sometimes to say "no" to the incessant demands of social engagements, to spending too much time and money on presents, to racing hither and yon. We need some kind of surgery on our souls, the kind of surgery that places Christ as Lord. We need to choose to adore him, to take time alone with him spent in appreciation of his life, his death and his resurrection. In order to be given the Christmas we desire, we have to let the sword pierce our soul, to let Christ be who he would be in his greatest moment- not just the human moment of his birth.

Make some choices about adoring him, appreciating him, honestly hearing his word, willingly obeying his commands, and spending time on our knees before this one. Having made these choices, we are most likely to get the other things we want.

I am a sucker for Christmas traditions. You can hardly think of something about Christmas that I do not love. I always look forward to the special food of Christmas. Over the years, my mother has always made Christmas cookies that do not get made at any other time of the year. And it has been fun to see my father take his place as the head of the family and be the giver and orchestrator of events on Christmas. Occasionally, I have had some of this role myself.

Earlier this week, I discovered that a tradition has sprung up on our block without me knowing. One of our neighbors approached me and said, "When are you going to put up the Christmas lights on your house?" I said, "Soon, I guess. Why do you ask?" He replied, "None of the rest of us put up our lights until you do. I did not know I had that responsibility! It turns out that the Christmas enthusiasm of our family which makes us put up our lights shortly after Thanksgiving has affected the entire neighborhood. And at least one neighbor has said it has become the natural order of things that our lights go up first.

Traditional values at Christmas--all of the fun, the memories, and the emotion--ought to be received as gifts by people who appreciate the Lord. Yet, the message of the incarnation is infinitely the greater message. Mary's baby came to pierce souls. Mary's baby came for the fall and rise of many. Mary's baby came to lay claim on us to hear and obey the word of God. Family memories and family closeness are subordinate to this and come as a result of the incarnation. If we seek them for themselves and forget the greater message, we are most likely to end Christmas as so many do, feeling as if a great opportunity has been missed, as if we did not quite capture the spirit this year.

Take some time; make some choices that will allow you to center upon Christ in Christmas. We need to reflect upon the theology of the event of his birth. Leslie, my wife, was telling me that this year has been better for her than many previous ones. She has more of a sense of the personal Christ in this Christmas because she teaches Sunday School to third and fourth graders. By repeatedly emphasizing for them who Christ is at Christmas and through thinking of creative ways to tell the story, she has found herself more caught up in its truth. Instead of having everything taken away by the Christmas machine, she has been able to reflect upon the Lord. As a result, Christmas this year has been both more spiritual and more fun than in other years.

We have to do something. We cannot hope this kind of Christmas will happen by accident. We have to make choices about the use of our time, what we do with ourselves, and what we let our minds dwell upon during this season. Christ must regain the central place at Christmas.

I would like to pray for us all the prayer of apostle Paul's. Instead of aiming at the warmth of Christmas, I pray that we will be focused upon the reality of Christ and receive the warmth as a gift. The prayer found in Ephesians 1:18-23 was not written for Christmas but for the Christian life in general, asking the Lord to take the central place for us again:

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope

of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come. And he put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him who fills all in all.

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