Christmas Eve Message: *The Sign and the Sword*  

Merry Christmas Church! It truly is “the most wonderful time of the year!” I want to thank our musicians for leading us in worship, and I want to thank our children for their wonderful artwork! We are blessed as a church with tremendous talent, but more than anything, we are blessed by the presence of the Holy Spirit as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus of Nazareth.

Tonight marks my 12th Christmas Eve serving as your pastor here at Colonial. Which means, if you have been around that long, you’ve heard my best take on Christmas on several occasions. I have sought to defend the historical veracity of the biblical claims regarding Christmas; I have examined various characters in the Christmas narrative; and I’ve even compared the advent of Jesus with Superman!

This evening, however, I would like us to consider a part of Jesus’s birth story that is not typically covered on Christmas Eve…it is the story of what happened in the month following Jesus’ birth. So, keeping in mind all that has been read thus far about the great night of our Savior’s birth, let us now stand and read Luke 2:21-35.

21 And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. 22 And 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 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

26 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. 27 And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, 28 he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,

29 “Lord, now you are letting your servant[a] depart in peace, according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation
31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

33 And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed 35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

My message will have four short subtitles this evening: 1) Jesus the Ordinary; 2) Jesus the Extraordinary; 3) Jesus the Lightning Rod; and 4) An Accurate Picture of the Christian Life!

**I. Jesus the Ordinary**

In vs. 21 we read, “On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived.”
In the ancient Jewish culture, a male child would be brought to the temple to be circumcised and to receive his name. This custom based on Genesis 17:12 “He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised.” There is not much to see here except to observe that Mary and Joseph were ordinary Jews who sought to observe God’s law in the way that they raised Jesus.

In vss. 22-24 we read, 22 And 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 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”

In addition to his circumcision as already mentioned, there are two more ceremonies that take place here according to Jewish law:

1) Jesus is consecrated to the LORD in obedience to Exodus 13:2 where God says to Moses, “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me…” According to Jewish custom, the parents would have paid five shekels (20 day’s wages) to redeem the first born.

2) Then, because of the bloody nature of child birth, the mother was considered unclean for seven days and unworthy of approaching all holy things for another 33 days. After that time, she would offer up a sacrifice of a lamb and a dove or a pigeon. If she was too poor to purchase a lamb, a second dove or pigeon would suffice. Mary’s offering was two doves or pigeons, which reveals that the young couple was quite poor. By the way, this is where “two turtle doves” comes from in The Twelve Days of Christmas!

Now, why is any of this important? Why would Luke include these mundane details in his gospel account of Jesus’ life? I think Luke is careful to demonstrate here that Mary and Joseph were ordinary, God-fearing Jewish people. They were not anything other than standard Jewish citizens. This is important theologically. Listen to how the Apostle Paul later describes Jesus in Galatians 4:4, “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”

As much as Jesus is special and unique in all of human history, we must remember that Jesus was born into poverty; born under the law; and he was raised as an ordinary Jew. Only one under the law could redeem those under the law (by the way…all human beings are “under the law!”)...so even here at the beginning of his life, Jesus is presented as one who is ordinary and not an exception to the moral accountability that is inherent with being a human being on planet earth. Church, take heart: Jesus was one of us…He was “ordinary.” However, as we shall see, Jesus was also extraordinary.

II. Jesus the Extraordinary

In vss. 25-26, Luke introduces us to a man named Simeon, a man who was righteous and devout…a man filled with the Holy Spirit. According to Luke, the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would see the Lord’s anointed One before he died. We don’t know how long Simeon had been waiting, but we get the sense that he is very old. So, at just the right time, the
Spirit leads Simeon into the temple courts where he meets Mary and Joseph and their son, Jesus. Luke tells us in vs. 28-32 that Simeon took the baby into his arms, blessed God and said,

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29 “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
   according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation
31 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
   and for glory to your people Israel.”
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Simeon is beside himself. He has waited his whole life for this moment! His heart has finally found what he has longed for…the Messiah of God, the hope of Israel!

Church, this is such a teaching moment if you have the eyes to see it. I was wrapping presents this morning and I was thinking about why we even wrap presents in the first place! Have you ever thought about that? By the way…I stink at wrapping presents. I’m the guy who can’t correctly estimate how much paper is necessary, so I actually have little pieces of unmatched paper to patch the places that didn’t get covered the first time. Some of you dads know what I’m talking about, right?

So anyways, I was thinking about this whole “wrapping the gift thing,” and it occurred to me: the wrapping makes the gift a mystery, and the waiting until Christmas morning makes opening the presents that much more exciting! Can you see that every Christmas we are reliving Simeon’s story? We are waiting for the unveiling of a mystery, and we are certain that the mystery will be a gift that brings us joy!

But then what happens when we unwrap the gifts and discover that which has been hidden? Perhaps we are happy, perhaps we are pleased and even grateful, but once the gift is unwrapped and the mystery is revealed…once all the presents are opened and we are taking inventory of the loot…there is a bit of a let-down, right? Why is that? Because no material gift can actually bring us the joy that our hearts long for. The gifts we give and receive at Christmas point beyond themselves to the long awaited, mysterious gift of God that comes to humanity one starry night as a baby, lying in a manger. Simeon has waited his whole life for this mystery to be unwrapped, and then one day…the mystery is revealed, and Simeon is overjoyed—he is not disappointed…because this child is God’s gift, and He will bring joy to every human heart who receives Him!

Simeon’s song, famously known as the *Nunc Dimittis*, proclaims the extraordinary nature of who Jesus is and who He is to become: Jesus is God’s singular act of salvation; He will save people from their sins; He will be a light to the Gentiles; He will be bring glory to God and to His people, Israel. All of these things we know are true as we reflect upon the last 2000 years. After hearing Simeon’s song, Luke writes vs. 33, “And his father and mother marveled at what was said about Him.” No doubt God arranged the meeting with Simeon in the temple that day to encourage Mary and Joseph that they had not just been dreaming…this ordinary young boy in their arms was indeed the Extraordinary Anointed One of God. He is the One…He is the Mystery that the whole world has been longing for. Church…Jesus still is the Mysterious Gift that the whole world has been longing for, whether they know it yet or not, amen?
Now, so far, all of the messaging that we’ve heard about Jesus in the birth narrative (both the ordinary and the extraordinary) has been very positive, and that’s usually all the messaging we focus on when it comes to a Christmas Eve service.

However…let us also acknowledge an awkward reality: this purely positive, hopeful, and affirming message regarding the birth of Jesus who brings “joy to the world” sometimes comes across as naïve, insensitive, or even irrelevant to those of us who have discovered that following Jesus has not exactly made our lives easier. We know there is joy for all the world in Jesus, but we also know that following Jesus has led to some serious conflict in ourselves and in our relationships with family, friends, co-workers, and so on. So…let’s stop for a minute and deal with that observation. This leads to my third subheading:

**III. Jesus the Lightning Rod**

I have no doubt that many of us are asking real and difficult questions this evening, like: “Why am I struggling to feel the joy? Why is there so much internal conflict within me? Why do I often feel like a stranger in a strange land? Why is being a Christian in my non-believing family so hard? Why do my co-workers exclude me due to my faith in Christ?” When we as Christians struggle with these questions on a Christmas Eve, we are tempted to think that maybe we are doing this Christianity-thing all wrong…as though the “good news of great joy” applies to some, but not to us.

Such is why I think it’s important to read EVERYTHING that Simeon says here about Jesus. After Simeon blesses the young family, it would seem there was a brief, private conversation that happened between Simeon and Mary. You get the sense that he pulls her aside as Joseph is tending to their infant son, and like some elven king in the *Lord of the Rings*, Simeon whispers in vs. 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, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul, too.”

Simeon’s prophecy of Jesus here in vss. 34-35 introduces the first shadow of the cross into this otherwise beautiful nativity scene. Yes--Jesus is the long-awaited Savior of the world; indeed He will forgive sins; He will serve as a light to the Gentiles and He will bring glory to Israel. But there is more to this story. The Holy Spirit has revealed to Simeon that difficult days lie ahead; Mary needs to be prepared for what is to come.

The Holy Spirit reveals two sobering realities about this child, Jesus: 1) He will be a sign; and 2) He will be a sword.

First, Simeon states, “This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

Simeon reveals that the Savior of the world is going to cause conflict! Jesus is going to be a SIGN, and many will oppose Him. Why is that? As we saw just a few days ago in the third chapter of John’s Gospel, “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who
does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.”

Jesus reveals the hearts of people…He is the true Light that reveals the darkness that is within us and within our community. People who love darkness can’t stand the light!

I recently read a story of a police officer who, after converting to Christianity, would not take the money that the local pimps quietly passed around his precinct so that the police would not arrest their prostitutes. A couple of other policemen approached him and said, “You’d better watch it. You are making the other guys very nervous. You have to take the money.” He refused, and after getting some anonymous threats, he had to move to another city (Keller; Hidden Christmas, p. 119).

As Tim Keller writes, “You don’t have to be Jesus Christ to get people furious at being exposed for what they are. Just living an honest, moral life will expose gossip in the office, corruption in government, and racism in the neighborhood. The manger at Christmas means that, if you live like Jesus, there won’t be room for you in a lot of inns.” (Ibid, 119).

The Light of Christ not only reveals the darkness in us and around us; the Light of Christ also reveals our pride. Some of the greatest conflicts we see in the ministry of Jesus are with the best, most religious people in the community. People who are convinced of their own goodness are typically quite hostile to Jesus and His followers.

I was speaking to a friend recently who experienced intense conflict in her family due to her faith in Christ. Apparently several of her family members were having a conversation wherein they agreed that they were better people than the vast majority of the world’s population. When my friend tried to make the case that we are all corrupt and hopelessly fallen people who need grace and forgiveness, her family members became quite angry. This is a common story. If we have pride in our own goodness, we are most certainly going to be offended by the Light of Jesus Christ. Pastor Tim Keller says it this way in his little book entitled Hidden Christmas:

All human beings have a motor of self-justification deep in their hearts. We need to believe we are competent to run our own lives and save ourselves. Anything that prevents this motor from functioning makes us very angry. Nothing is a bigger problem for this whole complex of repression and denial than Jesus himself. Everything about his life says to us, “you are not your own; you are bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:19). No one wants to hear that. It is not surprising that they got mad at him. If you identify with Jesus and you don’t hide your connection, some people will get mad at you too.

Simeon was right: Jesus is a sign…He is a LIGHT…that reveals the hearts of people. And because people don’t care to have their hearts revealed, Jesus is often a sign that is opposed. He causes those who are proud to fall. He causes those who love the darkness to be offended. But he also causes those who are fallen to rise. In other words, Jesus is good news to those who know they need a Savior, but He is an offense to those who think they are good people, or those who love the darkness. That is why we discover that to love Jesus, to follow Jesus, to be saved by Jesus, to live as a disciple of Jesus…is to embrace a life that involves some conflict. Jesus has always been a Lightning Rod, and that is not changing anytime soon. Now—let us not be dismayed! There is still great joy, and peace, and hope that comes in receiving the Christ…all of
that is true. But let us not proclaim the good news of Christmas and leave out the “conflict” part. The Bible tells the whole truth, and so should we.

Let me conclude with the last thing that Simeon says to Mary: Jesus will be a sword. Simeon whispers, “and a sword will pierce through your own soul also.” I can’t even imagine how those words affected Mary, but as we study the Gospel, there can be no doubt those words came true. Mary would see her firstborn son falsely accused, tortured, and murdered by those who were so offended by His light that they would not rest until He was dead.

Yet there was another way that the “sword” of Jesus pierced her soul. Jesus caused internal conflict in Mary, even as Jesus creates internal conflict in many of us. Let me show you.

In Mark 3:21, when Jesus had just begun His ministry, we are told that Jesus’ “mother and brothers”…His own family, tried to convince Jesus to call it quits because they were saying, “He is out of his mind.” Then, when Mary and Jesus’ brothers come to fetch him in Mark 3, Jesus responds saying, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”

I suspect these words cut Mary to the heart. Though Jesus was Mary’s first-born Son, He was also Her Lord, and He did not spare even His own mother a gentle rebuke when she tried to fit Jesus into her idea of what He should be doing. Jesus once said of himself in Matthew 10, “I have not come to bring peace but a sword.” Clearly Jesus did not mean a military sword…He meant a sword to the hearts of men and women. A sword that would cut deep, causing internal conflict and hopefully leading to repentance. Sometimes the love of Jesus cuts like a sword.

I was reading St. Augustine the other day and he was commenting on this notion. He writes, “If ever you wish to preserve charity, above all do not think of it as something languishing and idling; nor that it is preserved by a kind of laziness and negligence. It is not preserved in that way. Do not think that you love your son when you do not discipline him or that you love your neighbor when you do not correct him. That is not charity but weakness. Let your charity be fervent to correct, to amend. If behavior is good, take delight in it; if wicked, let it be amended, corrected. Do not love the error in man but love the man. For man is the work of God; error is the work of man. Love the work of God, not the work of man. To love the latter is to destroy the former; to cherish the former is to purify the latter. But even if you are sometimes roused to anger, let it be by love of setting things right.

Jesus pierces our soul as a sword because He loves us too much to leave us the way He found us…He is determined to set things right in us! The sword of Christ is the surgeon’s scalpel that must cut away the cancer to save the patient. Jesus is determined to set things right in us, and that can be a painful process that involves some internal conflict…I suspect many of you know exactly what I’m referring to. But there is a purpose to His correction: Jesus is constantly shaping us to accomplish His will for our lives…and His will is always about bringing glory to His Father, saving the world, bringing about justice for the oppressed, providing families for the fatherless, and binding up the broken.

Here’s the problem: most of us still believe that our lives should be safe, comfortable, and void of conflict. But Jesus never promised us an easy path or a painless life. In fact, He promised just the opposite. He regularly predicted that following Him and serving under His leadership would include conflict, persecution, and sacrifice. We must remember: Jesus is not just our Savior…He
is also our Lord. He is not just the Ordinary and the Extraordinary…He is the Lightning Rod, the Change Agent, and the Liberator. He is the Light of the world and the Lion of Judah who has come to do battle with the Darkness…and that means if we follow Jesus, we are going to war as well.

Jesus is the Sign and the Sword…He is the Ordinary, Extraordinary, Lightning Rod! Such is why true, authentic followers of Jesus carry an ironic paradox within themselves—it is a paradox of inner conflict in the midst of inner peace. It is the very tension that we feel here on Christmas Eve. So let me conclude by painting you

IV. An accurate picture of the Christian life.

Authentic Christians tend to have significant conflict within themselves as they seek to follow Jesus. They have internal conflict first because the closer we come to Jesus, the more powerfully and ruthlessly his Light reveals our darkness. That is why our lives can initially feel harder and more complicated when we begin to follow Jesus. A lot of our habits and ways of thinking prior to Christ did not cause us unrest…but now that Jesus lives within us, those habits are offensive…to US! Thus the inner conflict we feel is part of the process of being sanctified into someone new! Authentic believers also experience some conflict with their friends and families as they undergo these changes because the more they shine with the light of Christ, the more those around them feel exposed due to their darkness. And finally, authentic Jesus-followers feel inner-conflict regarding the world around them. Those who know Jesus can no longer look the other way when they encounter the homeless or the orphaned. They are no longer satisfied to do nothing in the face of injustice. Those things that break the heart of God now break their hearts, and that leads to an inner-conflict which should and often does lead to action…thanks be to God, right?

Now, in addition to experiencing inner conflict, those who love Jesus are also characterized by an incredible inner peace that passes understanding! That sounds like a contradiction, but it’s not! In other words, when followers of Jesus face pain, persecution, or the end of their earthly lives…when there’s not enough money or they have suffered some horrible injustice…those who find their identity in Jesus seem to have a peace that cannot be shaken. Jesus-followers are at their best when all the circumstances are at their worst! Why? The sword of Christ has prepared them to endure hardships with confidence. Because Christ is in them, shaping them, preparing them, sanctifying their hearts…their faith is real, their relationship with Jesus is real, and their lives bring glory to God and hope to the world no matter how dire the circumstances.

This is the real picture of the Christian life, and we find it all throughout the New Testament and in the testimonies of Christ-followers throughout the ages. Simeon’s predictions were correct…Jesus is the Sign and the Sword, He is the Ordinary, Extraordinary Lightning Rod; and He is the Hope of the World!

Church, I would long for all of us to have a real, honest relationship with the REAL Jesus, the Son of God, our Savior and our Lord. The REAL Jesus is the source of our conflict and the source of our peace! And The REAL Jesus can be trusted! He will enter into your REAL life now and make a REAL difference for all eternity. Jesus is the mysterious gift you have been waiting for, but you must receive Him and embrace all that He has for you. And when you do, hold on! He will change everything, because that’s what Saviors do! Let us pray.