

“What Happens Next?”

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008

Outside, the ground was covered with a blanket of new-fallen snow. Inside, a blazing fire crackled in the fireplace. Tinsel and lights shimmered on the Christmas tree. Underneath it, little kids poked eagerly at the presents. And in the air, ah! Not only the yuletide scent of evergreen but, wafting in from the kitchen, the faint aroma of good German *Stollen* baked just that afternoon.

Almost sounds like a scene from Currier & Ives, doesn't it? Actually, though, this goes back to when I was in college – a Christmas I spent with my cousins in Glen Ellyn, Illinois. We had just gotten home from church. Before the kids went to bed, we gathered in the living room to complete their Christmas Eve ritual. First, each child got to open a present. “Just one!” their father emphasized. Then, the candles of the Advent wreath were lit one last time, and my cousin read the Christmas story. To my ears, of course, it was very familiar; the same beautiful words from Luke we hear every year. But to the little ears of three-year old David, the story was still fresh and new. He hung on every word, just as he would listening to any bedtime story. Finally, his father came to the last verse, **“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”** Then he closed the Bible. But David wasn't ready for the story to end. Not at all! Tugging at his father's sleeve, he asked, “Daddy, what happens next?”

I don't remember what my cousin answered. I think he said the shepherds went home to their families and went right to bed – just like three sleepy kids were about to do. Or some such thing. But David's question was a good one. *What happens next?* Leave it to a three-year old to realize that the good news of Christmas needs some kind of follow-up, some kind of response. That was true the first Christmas, and it is just as true tonight. When you hear the angel proclaim, **“To you is born a Savior,”** you have to wonder: *What does this mean for me?* When you see the Christ child reaching out to you in love, you have to wonder: *Why has He come for me?* So the story cannot end there! Something more *has* to happen. But what will it be? What will *our* response be? When you think about it, David's question is really pretty deep, isn't it? And personal. In fact, it's a question well worth asking ourselves tonight as we celebrate God's gift of a Savior. What *will* our response to Him be? *What happens next?*

And let me just say, this is a good question to ask ourselves regardless of how long we've been Christians. I know some of us have been at this a very long time, so it might be easy to think we've *already* responded, we've *already* accepted Jesus; there's nothing *left* to happen next. But the truth is: there's always *something* left to happen next. Faith is an on-going process. It's not just deciding once and for all *that* the Gospel is true. It's not just believing *that* Jesus did everything necessary to save us. No, as important as that is, faith is much, much more. It's trusting *in* Jesus, depending *on* Jesus, turning *to* Jesus come what may – and that's a day-to-day kind of thing, even minute-to-minute, every

step of the way through life. We must never be content to say: *We've already responded.* A living faith keeps on responding to the Gospel, keeps on responding to Jesus, knowing full well that what matters most is *what happens next.*

Case in point: I remember one Christmas Eve many years ago when a young man waited after the last service and asked if he could talk with me. As we sat in the church, he said that my sermon had really touched his heart. He then told me why that was and what was going on in his life. To look at him, you would think his life was going great. He dressed well and presented himself well. But that was just the surface. In reality, his life had hit a major rough patch, and he didn't know what to do. Now, this young man considered himself a Christian. He had been baptized, confirmed, was even real active as a teen, but then he kind of went on spiritual auto-pilot. He figured he had accepted Jesus, believed all the right things; he had the "religion-thing" nailed, and God became less and less a priority. Until now. Now he knew he needed help. And as he had heard me talk about what it means to have a Savior, something clicked inside: "*That's what's been missing. I need help from God.*" Certainly, I had to agree with him. How could I not? And after I prayed with him, he said he already felt so much better. God *was* what he needed! But as he got ready to go, I didn't feel good about just leaving it there. So I asked him – not in these exact words, but in essence: *So...what happens next?*

He just kind of looked at me, not quite understanding. So I asked another way: *What happens next?* Because frankly, I didn't want him to make the mistake I've seen so often. Someone's going through a rough patch, so they turn to God, and at that moment they feel such comfort, such relief! At that moment, they have such good intentions, too. *From now on, my life is going to be different!* Yes, they have such good intentions...at that moment. But then...that's it. There's no follow-up, no follow-through.

And unfortunately, faith doesn't work like that. It's not like waving a magic wand: *turn to the Lord and – poof! – all your problems will be solved and you'll feel so much better!* No, it's more like taking the Lord's hand over the long-haul and depending on Him day by day to get you through. Instead of going it alone, you keep on trusting that He has forgiven you, keep on trusting that He will help and guide you, keep on trusting that He will be with you all the way until He finally takes you home. That's what it means to have a Savior. It is a life-long relationship. He's the lord of life; your friend for life – whatever life may bring. And when you do trust Him that way, Jesus makes a big difference in your life! But this has to be over the long-haul, not just a flash in the pan. So you see why this question matters so much: *What happens next?*

In his particular case, what happened next was everything a pastor could hope for. That's not to say this man's situation suddenly took a turn for the better. Healing certain wounds took quite some time. And it's not to say his character

suddenly changed for the better. That, too, took quite some time. But isn't that to be expected? Some things do take time – especially important things – which is why, when it comes to the gift of the Savior, we need to take hold of His hand for the long-haul.

That's what this young man did. The last I saw him, that's what he was still doing. And though it wasn't always easy, every step of the way was worth it. He experienced what a difference it makes to trust in the Lord's forgiveness, help, and guidance. He experienced what a difference it makes to let the Lord decide what happens next. And that, my friends, is true faith. That is what it means to have a Savior. That is what Christmas is really all about – not just celebrating the birth of the Savior or even accepting Him once, but responding to the Savior again and again, trusting the Savior step by step, all the way through life.

So...*what happens next?* That is the question this Christmas Eve. Wherever we are in our walk with the Lord, whatever we may be facing right now, that is the question we take home with us tonight: *What happens next?*

And how shall we respond? At different times of life, we are faced with different challenges. Some here tonight may be carrying burdens of guilt. Some, perhaps, are feeling alone. Others may be going through a rough patch themselves – financially, relationally. And still others may be mourning the loss of a loved one. For many, in fact, this may be a tough Christmas. A very tough Christmas! But whatever we are facing right now, remember: the good news is still good news: **“To you is born a Savior.”** It's still good news, because whatever we're facing, Jesus comes to us this Christmas, too, offering what we most deeply need at this time of life. He offers us precious gifts – forgiveness, hope, strength, guidance, peace such as the world cannot give. And infinitely better, Jesus offers us Himself. To each of us He says personally: *I am here for you. Take my hand. Trust Me over the long-haul. I'll get you through.* **“To you is born a Savior.”**

Yes, this good news is still good news, good news that invites a response. We've heard it. We're celebrating it. Soon we'll take it home. And then comes the most important part of Christmas: *what we do with this good news.* What happens next? Amen.