

## **“Christ Was Born For This!” (Luke 2:25-33) Christmas 1, December 27, 2009**

Stuart Briscoe tells of an interesting exchange he once had with an insurance agent. It all began quite innocently as the agent said, “Mr. Briscoe, if something should happen to you...” “Please don’t say that,” Briscoe interrupted, “It upsets me.” The agent was a little taken aback, but tried again, “With all due respect, sir, if something should happen to you...” “Please don’t say that,” Briscoe repeated. “It upsets me.” Perplexed, the agent said, “I don’t understand, sir. What upsets you?” So Briscoe explained, “What upsets me is that you talk about life’s one certainty as if it were merely a possibility. Death isn’t a possibility, it’s a certainty. With death, never say ‘if.’ Say ‘when.’”

That’s true enough, isn’t it? Death is *not* just a possibility. It *is* life’s one certainty. Yet even so, I’m sure we can all identify with that agent being reluctant to talk about death so openly. That’s pretty common these days. People don’t like to think about death. People don’t like to be reminded of death. In fact, many people don’t even like to use the word “death.” Instead, they use phrases like “gone on,” “passed away,” “at peace,” and the like. That just seems a kinder, gentler way of dealing with it.

But is that really dealing with death? Not as far as I can tell! And that’s a problem these days. For if you don’t talk about death, think about death, even acknowledge death, how can you be prepared for it? You can’t. And I am here to tell you, a great many people are not prepared for death. A great many don’t seem to even feel a need to prepare for death. Quite the opposite! It’s as if they think life should go along indefinitely, and they should be able to spend the time doing their thing, but then – out of the blue, without any warning! – death shows up like some boorish intruder crashing their party, and it just ruins everything! ...Which, I suppose it does, if this life is all you care about. But even if that were the case, wouldn’t common sense tell you that eventually what happens to everyone else is going to happen to you and your loved ones, so you need to be prepared? And even if you were one of those who called yourself “spiritual,” not “religious;” one of those who talk about life as a “journey” – wouldn’t you think about where the journey is heading, where you’re going to wind up, and whether you have any choice about where you’ll wind up? To me, that would be the smart approach. But all too often, it’s not even on folks’ radar – until it’s too late.

Case in point, I think back to Christmas 1981. My neighbor stopped by to tell me that his 17-year old son, Chris, had disappeared, and he asked me to pray for him. I asked if the boy might have run away. His dad knew of no reason why he would. He had seemed happy, well-adjusted, popular. But the last time anyone had seen him was just before Winter break. He had had an argument with a teacher over a test grade and had taken off in his car – probably up to the Santa Ana foothills; that’s where he often went to let off steam. But there was no sign of him. And during the whole Winter break there was no sign of him – until January 7, when his car was found at the bottom of a ravine. Apparently, he had

taken a curve so fast that the car jumped the guardrail, leaving no sign of what had happened; the car had been hidden in the brush. As far as the coroner could tell, he had died immediately; he had not suffered. But still, he was just seventeen! His life was just unfolding. This was so unexpected!

His funeral was huge. Mostly, it was people telling stories about Chris, what a great guy he was, what a tragedy it was to lose him. But afterward, at least a few people wondered aloud about some deeper things. Did Chris know the Lord? Was he saved? Had he gone to heaven? I couldn't answer because I didn't know Chris. But what was sad was that his parents couldn't answer, either. They weren't a *non*-religious family, but by the same token, faith didn't play much of a role in their home. God was assumed, but rarely mentioned, never discussed, so they had no idea where Chris was in his spiritual life – or where he was, period. Now they could only hope against hope that he was in heaven.

My friends, can you imagine anything more painful? To lose a child at Christmas is tough enough, but to realize you never taught your child what Christmas was about – never taught him who Christ was, and why He came, and what He offers all who believe in Him, so that, in spite of this tragedy, you could at least be sure of seeing your child again – it's hard to imagine anything more painful! *If only, if only, if only we had taken time to prepare him for life's one certainty.* Yes, if only!

And that is why I'm bringing this up. To some, it may seem strange to talk about death the Sunday after Christmas – kind of overshadowing the merriment of the season. But if that's the case, let's remember what Christmas is about, because when it comes right down to it, Christmas is about death – or rather, what God has done so that we can be prepared for death; or better still, what God has done to give us victory over death and guarantee us a glorious eternity beyond death! Isn't that why Christ came? To be our Savior. Isn't that why He was born? To save us *from sin for eternal life*. Sure it was! That's what the angel was talking about when he announced “**good tidings of great joy!**” “*For us and for our salvation,*” Christ took on our human nature. “*For us and for our salvation,*” He atoned for our sins. “*For us and for our salvation,*” He reconciled us to God. In fact, “*for us and for our salvation,*” He did everything necessary for us to have eternal life as a gift. We don't have to earn it, don't have to deserve it. He invites us to believe it and receive it. We're saved by grace through faith. That's what it means to have “**a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**” And all that got underway the first Christmas! So let's not get squeamish talking about death right after Christmas! That is what Christmas is about! As we sing in the old carol:

*Now we need not fear the grave! Jesus Christ was born to save!  
He has opened heaven's door, and we are blessed forevermore!  
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!*

Yes, He was! And really, isn't that the point in our text? Luke paints this wonderful image of Simeon coming into the temple! This old, old, old, old man,

joyfully scooping up the Christ child in his arms and telling God, *“I’m ready to die now, Lord, for at last I know for sure that I have a Savior!”* He wasn’t squeamish talking about death, was he? Not in the least! Not even at Christmas time! For good reason! Simeon understood why Christ came – and frankly, for him it was not one second too soon! For as good and godly as he may have been, Simeon knew he wasn’t perfect. As good and godly as he may have been, Simeon knew how much he needed a Savior. He needed a Savior to win him the forgiveness he could never earn on his own. He needed a Savior to conquer death and win him eternal life. He needed a Savior! Yes, he had always known that God would send a Savior someday. But with death inching ever closer, he sure hoped to see that Savior soon! And here he was! In the flesh! The one born to free him from sin, born to win him eternal life, and all as a gift of grace. So, far from feeling squeamish, Simeon scooped up this Christ child and sang out with joy: *“Lord, now let Your servant depart in peace, according to Your Word, for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared before the face of all people: a Light to lighten the gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel!”*

For Simeon, two things were clear. Death wasn’t just a possibility; it was a certainty. But now, thanks to Christ, salvation wasn’t just a possibility; it was a certainty. The same is true for us. And what greater news could there be, what greater gift could we receive, than a Savior who gives us victory over death? Especially at this time of year, when we miss departed loved ones so much, we have the assurance that they’re not so much *gone* as *gone on* to a life with God in eternal glory – because Christ was born for this, born to make it possible. We have the comfort of knowing that a great reunion is coming; we will see our loved ones again; we’ll be with them forever – because Christ was born for this, born to make it possible. He was born for this, lived for this, died for this, rose for this – all to make our salvation possible! So let’s not shy away from this fact as if it overshadowed Christmas. Let’s embrace this fact as the deepest meaning of Christmas. Let’s embrace it as warmly as Simeon embraced the Christ Child, so that we find in Christ the same blessed assurance – to comfort us as we think of departed loved ones, and to prepare us to face death ourselves, so that we will be ready whenever our time may come.

In our family history, one person who really set a great example of this was my great-grandmother, Elise Timmermann. I never knew her, of course. She was just 36 when she died. But her faith and witness were so powerful that they continue to inspire us generations later – especially this one example from her last Christmas.

It was 1916, the middle of World War I. Her husband had been drafted into the Kaiser’s army. He was away on the Russian Front. So she was left with six children to care for and, on top of that, she had to run the family bakery. In pictures from that time, she looks thin and worn out. But it wasn’t just from work. She was very, very ill. In fact, she would take to her bed soon after this and would die the next month. But she was not about to let anything get in the way of

Christmas. She was determined to make it as special as she could for her children. So she brought in a small pine tree and decorated it with as many candles as she could spare. She baked a cake called *Klaben*, doing the best she could with what ingredients she had. She set up their little nativity scene – scuffed and chipped after so many years of use. And once she had everything arranged, she called the children to come down. The older ones were a little hesitant. They knew how things stood with their mother. The younger ones were a little fidgety. Fritz asked, “Where are the presents?” Smiling gently, she answered, “This year we have only one present, but it is the most precious gift of all. It is God’s gift of a Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ.” With that, she read them the Christmas story. Then, she told them what it meant for her to have a Savior – what it meant in life and in death. She put it simply, yet how deeply the words touched them all – so deeply that her daughter, my grandmother, carried this memory with her to the day she died: how prepared her mother was to face death, and how well she prepared her children on that Christmas Eve 1916.

No doubt, many of us could tell similar stories. My hope and prayer is that someday others will be able to tell such stories about us – how prepared we were to face death; how well our witness prepared others. It’s a bittersweet message we take home with us today, I know – especially for some of us, who are walking quite literally through the valley of the shadow of death. But this is where the Christmas message means the most. Like old Simeon, scooping up the Christ child with such joy, we know there is a reason we can be sure that our sins are forgiven. We know there is a reason we can be sure eternal life is guaranteed. We know there is a reason we can be sure that **“neither death nor life...nor anything in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.”** That reason is Jesus Christ. *“Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!”* Amen.