

What Came After Bethlehem

We are now on the other side of Christmas 2020. We enjoyed the special music, the lights, the decorations. In a real sense, it's back to the real world now.

Mary and Joseph had to get back to the real world, too. They could not linger forever with the shepherds and the angels in the stable at Bethlehem. Luke, in his gospel account, skips ahead from the Christmas story to that day when they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem for the rite of purification in accordance with Mosaic law.

There was a righteous and devout man in Jerusalem named Simeon. The Lord had revealed to him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the temple, Simeon gasped. He ran over and took the child up into his arms, looked toward the heavens and prayed, "Lord, now You are letting 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 peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of Your people Israel."

Then Simeon blessed Mary and Joseph, and said to Mary, "Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken against (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."

Simeon knew what lay ahead. He also knew that the plan of God was being worked out. As wonderful as Christmas is, it is only a small part of a much bigger drama of redemption. There would be no reason for Christmas if there were no other side of the story. The manger speaks of the love of God, but not nearly as eloquently as does the cross.

It is Christ's sacrificial love that drives His followers to be part of the redemption story. Carol Kent, in her book *Speak Up with Confidence*, tells the story of a missionary serving the Lord in Korea years ago. A young Korean woman was expecting a baby, and on Christmas Eve, she went into labor. A major storm was in progress, but the woman knew if she could just get to the home of the missionary, she would have the help she so desperately needed to bring her baby into the world.

She put on her winter wraps and started out alone on foot. She was several miles from home when her labor pains grew in frequency and intensity, and she knew she could not make it to her destination. She got beneath an old bridge that afforded a bit of shelter. There alone, in the middle of the night, she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. She immediately removed her coat and then, piece by piece, the rest of her clothing. Carefully, she wound every item around her baby until he looked like a cumbersome little cocoon. Then she fell asleep, too exhausted to do anything else.

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The next morning brightly dawned, and the missionary awoke with a song in her heart. It was Christmas Day, and there were so many people she wanted to see. She packed the car and started on her way. A few miles down the road, the engine sputtered, and the car finally stopped on top of an old bridge. As the missionary opened the door to go for help, she thought she heard a baby crying. Following the sound, she went under the bridge where she found a tiny baby boy very hungry, but very much alive. Next to the infant lay his frozen mother.

The missionary picked up the baby and took him to her home. In time, she was permitted to adopt the boy. As the years passed, she told him how his biological mother had given her life that he might live. The boy never tired of hearing the story, and he asked her to repeat it again and again.

On his 12th birthday, he asked the missionary to take him to the burial place of his mother. When they arrived, there was snow on the ground, and he asked his missionary mother to wait while he went to the gravesite alone. She watched her son as he trudged through the snow, tears streaming down his cheeks.

In amazement, she saw him slowly unbutton his coat, remove it, and gently lay it on the snowy grave. Next, he removed his shirt, trousers, shoes and socks and carefully placed each item on the grave of the mother who had given her all for him.

The missionary could take it no longer and went to her son, placing her coat around his bare, shivering shoulders. Through his tears, she heard him as he asked, "Were you colder than this for me, Mother? Were you colder than this?" And he knew that she was.

The angels and shepherds and wise men and Mary and Joseph and the Babe in the manger are one part of the drama of redemption. They have little meaning, however, without the last act – the cross and the empty tomb.

Such amazing grace. Such incomparable love. For you. For me.

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:2 ESV).

– Beecher Hunter