

“The Brightest Christmas of Your Life”

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20



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As I think about all of you on this Christmas Eve, a prayer arises from deep within my heart. It is a prayer that I pray for you and also for myself. I pray that this will be the brightest Christmas of your life. Now I can hear some of you saying, “Oh, wait a minute. You don’t know what’s going on in my life. Family problems, financial struggles, health concerns, this is hardly my brightest Christmas.” Still others of you are saying, “The brightest Christmas? No way. Not in a world like this. Not in a world where human suffering and tragedy are so pervasive. Not in a world with the kind of international and social crisis we face today. Not the brightest Christmas in all of that.”

Yes, there is certainly a lot of darkness in the world around us. And yet the light of Jesus Christ cannot be extinguished. He is the light of the world. He is the bright and morning star, the dawn of a new day. He promised to bring a light to all who walk in darkness. Jesus Christ is here tonight just as surely as he was born in Bethlehem of old. He is here in power. He is our light. The greatness need of our lives is to experience the light of the God, and that’s what Christ wants to give us tonight. In the darkness moments of our disappointment, our discouragement, our doubt and despair, he comes as the light of understanding, vision and hope.

Perhaps our difficulty with experiencing the brightness of Christmas is that we have somehow romanticize or trivialized the incredible meaning of Christ’s birth. Perhaps our Christmas celebration has become so shallow or so secular that it no longer speaks to the deep, dark places in our lives and in our world.

But think about this. Did you know that according to church tradition, a very interesting day follows the great celebration of Christmas day. Since the earliest of times, December 26th has been set aside to remember our first Christian martyr, Steven, who was stoned to death for telling a group of people the story of Jesus. December 26th? Steven? What possible connection can there be between the festival of Christmas and this first martyr of the faith? From a purely secular view of Christmas, Steven seems strangely out of place, almost offensive. But for those with eyes to see, Steven becomes an astounding reminder of what

it means to take the birth of Jesus seriously.

He stands as a living witness to the fact that Christmas is not a synonym for serene or secure. The peace of Christmas is not the same as freedom from strife. The joy of Christmas is not the same as freedom from sorrow. The new life we meet in the manger is not the same as freedom from death. Steven stands here to remind us of all this. He makes things uncomfortable for everyone who wants to bask peacefully in a sort of blissful, romantic Christmas mood. He stands here as a challenge and with a question we cannot escape. The Christmas we celebrate tonight and the happiness we feel—is this the real Christmas? Steven asks the question, and we must answer.

If we really think about the way Christmas is celebrated in our society, we must come to the sad conclusion that somehow we have missed the point of it all. Somewhere, in the midst of the shopping and decorating and festivities we have missed the earth-shaking impact of this simple birth and what it means in our lives. And because we forget so quickly the destiny of that babe born in Bethlehem, we need Steven to remind us that the Christmas story is not just a sentimental dream, a kind of Fantasy Island. Rather, the Christmas story deals with reality—cold, stark reality: A young couple struggling with an unexpected pregnancy, a baby born in the darkness of the night, in the cold of the winter, in an occupied country, and soon baby boys being killed by a jealous ruler named Herod, the flight of Mary and Joseph and Jesus as refugees to Egypt, and finally a most agonizing, shameful death on a cross.

Jesus was not born into a dream world, but a real world, and he didn't live in a dream world either. Nor can we. It is because Christmas deals with reality that the church remembers the very next day, Steven, that first martyr of our faith, and Steven reminds us that real Christians risk being persecuted, even killed, for trying to turn the world upside down. But that's not easy to swallow at Christmas.

Think about it. Did anything like this occur to you during the festivities of this Christmas season? Somewhere in the candlelight between the carols was there any upsetting, discordant note? Matthew writes, "When Herod, the king, heard these things, he was troubled." Could it be that the only trouble God has with Christmas is that it troubles us a little? We set it to music, but we seem more than a little shy about setting it to work.

Christmas is good news—earth-shaking news. God is with us—terribly and simply with us. And when God's outstretched arms fall across the manger in the form of a cross, we wonder, "Are we ready for this kind of news? Are we ready to welcome that Babe who comes not as a victorious ruler but as a servant? Are we ready to follow him wherever he leads?"

That's why we need Steven. And that's why, after every Christmas, Steven dies again, but not unremembered, not without jarring us out of our complacent Christmas mood, not without witnessing to the incredible good news that no darkness can ever extinguish the light of the world.

Is this going to be the brightest Christmas of your life? It can be, that is, if you allow Jesus, the

light of the world, to be the light of your life. The final ultimate test of a great Christmas is that we become radiant people. "Arise, shine. Your light has come," says the prophet Isaiah. "For the glory of the Lord has shone upon you."

Our brightest Christmas comes not when there is an absence of disappointment and heartache and discouragement from our lives and when everything is "peachy-keen" but when we know that whatever darkness we face, that darkness can never overcome the light of Christ. That's why we need to commit ourselves to a relationship with Christ that is personal and powerful—a relationship that will not fade away or be swallowed up by the dark moments of life. That's why we need the witness of Steven who in the darkness moments of his life, as he was being stoned to death, was filled with the Spirit of God, and the radiance of God's glory shown upon him.

Friends, when God thought of Christmas God had you in mind. The Christmas gift of a Savior has your name on it. May you receive that precious gift with a joyful heart and rejoice, on this brightest Christmas of your life. For unto you this day and everyday is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.