

## Not a Silent Night

### Piercing Mary's Soul

Frankton – 12/13/15

Scripture: Luke 2.25-35 Simeon blesses Jesus then warns Mary

Proposition: Our Advent preparation requires us to stroll by Jesus' cross

[SLIDE] This is the second sermon in this Advent series titled: Not a Silent Night. It's based on Adam Hamilton's book of the same name. We are looking at Jesus' life through the eyes of Mary, his mother. We are doing this differently than normal. We are going backward starting with Mary's later years and then ending up on the night Jesus was born. Last week we looked at Mary around 60 years old, facing her own death. We asked what she would have been doing those last 15 years of her life after Jesus died. We decided that she would be doing what Jesus asked his disciples to do: to reach out to people and share Christ's love. And we decided that's what we should be doing as well. Today we are going backward in time, closer to that first Christmas to a time about fifteen years before Mary's death, to the day she watched her son die on the cross. It was the day we now call Good Friday, but to Mary it was anything but good as she stood there at the foot of the cross.

We don't know for sure what Mary saw in the hours that led up to Jesus being on the cross. She probably didn't see Jesus before the Sanhedrin where he was tried and found guilty of blasphemy and sentenced to die. She was probably in the crowd when Jesus stood before Pilate. She heard with her own ears the crowd call for Pilate to set Barabbas free and crucify Jesus. She probably followed the crowd as Jesus carried his cross (or rather Simon carried Jesus' cross) to Golgotha. She heard the clang of the hammers against the nails and she saw her son hoisted up on his cross. We usually picture crucifixions taking place on a tall cross, but Jesus feet were probably only a two to three feet off the ground. So, realistically Mary could reach up and touch her son's chest as he gasped for air. Their eyes could meet; Jesus could speak directly to Mary. Mary stood there watching helplessly. It was the longest day of her life.

What was Mary thinking about during those hours as she waited and prayed for her son to die so his suffering would end? I'm sure she questioned God. "Why?! Why does he have to die?" As she tried to make sense of the terrible thing happening to Jesus, my guess is she probably remembered back to the events surrounding Jesus' birth. I wonder if she thought about Joseph's dream while she was still pregnant. "Mary, I had a dream last night..." The Hebrew form of Jesus is [SLIDE] Yeshua, which means "God saves." What a strange name to give to a child. She probably remembered the Magi and their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. She especially remembered the myrrh – an aloe primarily used to embalm the dead. What a strange gift to give to a child. She probably remembered the shepherds come running into the stable with their story about an angel and his message of good news and then the angelic choir. At the time, Mary pondered these things in her heart, and I think she still pondered them thinking, "How can this bloody cross possibly be good news? How can the death of my son bring peace to men on earth?"

And finally, on that terrible day, I'm pretty certain that Mary remembered one other event that happened shortly after Jesus was born. She and Joseph had gone to Jerusalem, just a couple of miles from Bethlehem, so that they could make their offering to dedicate Jesus to God. The

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prophet Simeon was there. An angel had told Simeon that he would not die without first seeing the Messiah. When Mary and Joseph entered the Temple, Simeon took the child and clutched it to his breast. He praised God for allowing him to see the Messiah and now he could die in peace. Then he spoke something to Mary that I think Mary remembered as she stood near Jesus on the cross on that extremely painful day: [SLIDE] *And a sword will pierce your own soul too.* [35]

Mary was not the only one struggling to make sense of the cross. The apostles were having the same problem. Jesus had tried to prepare them for that day. He told them three times that he would be killed yet rise again. Then on the day before his crucifixion, he took the ordinary elements of bread and wine and made them extraordinary by using them as symbols for his body and blood. Yet there is no evidence in the Gospels that the apostles understood what he was doing. It was only after the crucifixion and resurrection that they began to make sense of what happened. They looked at the suffering and death of Jesus and finally they understood that God was doing something in that moment to save the world.

I admit that how Jesus' death brings about our forgiveness remains something of an enigma for us post-modern folks. However, the imagery of one person suffering vicariously for another was much clearer to the people of Jesus' day. They routinely sacrificed animals to make amends or atone for their sins. By bringing an animal as a guilt or sin offering, their sins were placed on the animal. God provided this mechanism of sacrificing animals as a way for them to confess their sins, atone for them, and to receive forgiveness and grace. In that first century world, both Jew and gentile followers of Christ could look at the cross and understand that on it God's son was the gift offered, the sacrifice made.

The message of any guilt or sin offering that we make to atone for our sins is first that sin has been committed and guilt rightly aroused. [SLIDE] The cross is a pronouncement about human sin. We human beings are broken and are prone to do the wrong thing. As Isaiah said: *All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.* [53.6] But the cross is a pronouncement of more than that. The fact that Christ offered himself as a sacrifice on our behalf tells us that God longs to forgive us, redeem us, and restore us to a right relationship with him. Christ death bears our sins so that can happen.

When we look at the world around us, evidence of sin is everywhere. There are dramatic examples such as the shootings in San Bernardino, Paris, and Oregon and many other places. There is the whole issue of the selling and using of drugs and the crimes associated with getting the drugs and buying the drugs. There is the issue of human trafficking. There are terrible wars going on around the globe. There are the stabbings of Jews in Jerusalem by the Palestinians and the retaliation by the Jews against the Palestinians. There are seemingly daily murders committed in Indianapolis. And closer to home, we have our own assortment of crimes here in the greater metropolitan Frankton area.

But we deceive ourselves if we only point to others as the source of evil. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said something to the effect that it would be nice if there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing all the evils deeds. We could then separate out us good folks and destroy the evil ones. But then he added, [SLIDE] "But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

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The cross Mary stood before was a sign, a dramatic act of God in which he was holding a mirror up to humanity saying, “You have gone astray. And left up to your own devices, you always will. You need saved, but you can’t do it on your own. You cannot follow the path I want you to follow.” But the message of the cross did not end there; in the cross, God was also saying, “I want to save you. My son has taken your sin on his shoulders on this cross so that you might be set free.”

Precisely how Jesus death on the cross saves us is a mystery and there are many theories that I’m not going to bore you with today. But the cross makes sense to me when I look at it as a divine drama meant to touch our hearts, move us to repentance, and lead us to accept the truth that we are sinners and Jesus is our savior. [SLIDE] It is meant to lead us to accept a love and mercy that we don’t deserve and cannot afford. It is meant to lead us to an assurance that God has, in John Wesley’s words, “taken away my sins, even mine.”

What does Good Friday – Jesus’ death on the cross as an atonement for our sins – what does that have to do with Advent and Christmas? Here’s the answer: the child born on that first Christmas day would be on that cross on Good Friday. Perhaps, as Mary heard her son promise one of the thieves dying with him that he would be in paradise that day, maybe that’s when Mary fully grasped what was happening on the cross. As Mary watched and listened during those six hours on Golgotha hill, helpless and unable to save her son, it’s probable she remembered the events of that first Christmas morning, and began to understand that Jesus’ suffering would save her and all humankind.

The cross of Christ points us to the brokenness of humankind, but it also demonstrates the magnitude of God’s love for us and offers us peace with God and salvation through Jesus Christ. The salvation that you and I received cost Jesus his life and Mary her son. Our Advent journey, our preparation for Jesus’ birth, must move us to stroll by the cross, the cross on which he gave his life so that we could have ours. He bore the weight of our sins so that we might be set free. You see, God is the God of second chances. And third chances, and fourth chances, etc. Jesus came to save us from our sins and from ourselves. What wondrous love is this!



**Yeshua:  
God saves**

And a sword will  
pierce your own  
soul too.

Luke 2.35

**The cross is a  
pronouncement  
about human  
sin.**

**But the line dividing  
good and evil cuts  
through the heart of  
every human being.**

A. Solzhenitsyn

**The Cross is meant to  
lead us to accept a  
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