

“Born a Savior”

I.

“Great! Isn’t that just GREAT!!” As he pushed the off button on his iPhone, it took all Brian’s self-control not to heave the thing across the room. “What am I supposed to do now?” he said to the empty room; but he said it loudly enough that his wife Karen heard him from the kitchen and responded. “What is it now, Dear?”

Brian hesitated. He knew that if he walked into the other room he might get wisdom and understanding; but for the moment he just wanted validation for his frustration and rage. To talk about it ran the risk of seeing it as less deliciously awful than he was letting himself think it was. Karen was too practical; she would never stop with, “There, there... it must be *terribly* difficult for you.” He decided to chance it anyway.

“Do you *believe* these people?” he demanded as he strode into the kitchen. “Verla has pulled out.” Karen was massaging marinade into a brisket and didn’t bother to look up. “Pulled out of what?”

“The parlor carpet. Verla and Dorothy were going to go halves on a new carpet, but they can’t agree on a color. Dorothy wants brown and Verla wants green because it will complement the colors in that hideous portrait of her father that her mother painted and gave to the church decades ago. Either one of them can afford to buy a dozen new carpets without batting an eye. Now we’re stuck with that threadbare, flea-bitten, moth-infested thing we’ve got because *they* can’t agree on a color. Unbelievable!”

Karen chuckled. “I believe it. My sister’s minister in Lincoln was right.”

“Right about what?”

“Churches. He’s the guy who said that church fights are so nasty because the stakes are so low.”

“Oh, what does he know? He lives in Nebraska, for God’s sake! You’d think that just once people could be reasonable and place the greater good ahead of their own petty preferences! What does it matter what color the carpet is in the church parlor? This is crazy! I know what you’re thinking: you don’t have to say you told me so. I just thought that by going

on the Trustees I could do something to help the church. And I agreed to chair it when nobody else wanted to. I know how to chair a committee... but this is more like a knife fight! I thought we could just sit down and talk this through like adults.”

“Uh-huh,” Karen said. “And how is that working for you?”

Brian let out an ironic snort. “Not so great at the moment, thank you, Dr. Phil. Not so great.”

He walked into the living room and plopped down in the recliner across from the Christmas tree. Christmas music was playing, a choir softly singing carols; but it did nothing to soften Brian’s mood.

What is the point of churches, anyway? he thought to himself. The people basically mean well, I suppose. But they’re so busy with their little committees and their petty projects. Some of them are so pious that it almost makes you sick: Jesus this, Jesus that, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior? But most of them don’t talk about Jesus or God at all. Rev. Stephens is a good soul, I suppose. He’s kind enough. But most of the time it just seems that he wants us to think he’s smarter than we are, talking about God as though God were some sort of great puzzle to be solved with church-only jargon: incarnation, absolution, atonement, panentheism and blah, blah, blah, blah. And he’s always droning on about who wrote this particular book, what the Greek says and the historical significance of this or that. What’s the point? Most of us wouldn’t know God if we tripped over God... as though God had anything to do with it at all. Maybe we like it that way. Maybe we do church like this because it’s such a good place to hide from God. But, my God, it sure is a lot of work.

Karen delivered him from his delicious but unproductive internal rant. “We’re going to need to leave in about twenty minutes.” “Leave?” “You know about this: for the 7:00 service. We have to be there at 6:00. Kaily is a reader and Brandon is playing his saxophone.” Brian winced. “Oh, stop that,” Karen said, hitting him gently on the shoulder. “You know he’s gotten a lot better: we’re past the torturing geese stage, and they actually tuned the piano at church this year. He’s playing Silent Night, and he’s really been practicing a lot.” Brian nodded in resignation. “I know. It’ll be nice. It’s just that church feels like the last place I want to go right now. I feel like I work there. I feel like I *live* there.”

“Listen, honey,” Karen said as she knelt down in front of his chair to look him in the eye. “Do yourself a favor tonight. Just let it happen. Don’t think about the dust on the rafters. Don’t look around for burned-out bulbs. Don’t notice the water stains on the walls. Don’t think about the light bill or the heating bill or the carpet or anything else. Just let it happen. Listen to your daughter read and your son play. Sing a few Christmas carols. Let’s have a little peace on earth tonight, shall we? Can you try that?”

“I’ll *try*,” Brian replied softly. “I really do want to try.”

II.

They were all there. The church was crowded with all the regulars along with the Christmas and Easter folks who filled in the usually empty spots. Verla and Dorothy were both there early, sitting in their customary pews on opposite sides as if to send the message that neither intended to give an inch; and requiring others to climb over them to get to the remaining empty seats: we shall not be moved.

Brian and Karen sat near the front because their children would have to get out to read and to play; so most of the congregation was behind them. Brian was grateful not to have to look at everybody, but he could feel them there. There was more coughing and shuffling and sniffing and whispering than was typical in church.

And Reverend Stephens was different, too. He welcomed everyone warmly as the Advent candles were lit: hope, peace, joy and love. “We need them all,” he said. “But especially we need that last one. Love is born tonight.” And that struck Brian as the strangest thing he’d ever heard: love is born. We could use that, all right, he thought. Starting right here and right now, we could use that for sure.

The grade school choir sang a very sweet rendition of *Away in a Manger*. No crib for a bed... Jesus, the little Lord: that’s an odd image, isn’t it, an infant in charge of things? What kind of a world would that be? Brian sighed and tried to do as Karen had suggested: just let it happen.

There were prayers. There was an offering, and Brandon played his saxophone solo on Silent Night. He did well... sort of splattering the first high note on “all is calm, all is bright;” but then he gathered himself and got more secure as he went along, soaring through “sleep in heavenly pe---ace” and coming down with a perfect landing. The full church meant he’d have to play it through twice in order to give them time to let the plates get around; and the second time through was even better. When he had put down the

saxophone and slid back into the pew, Brian put his arm around his son. “That was lovely, Brandon,” he whispered, “really lovely.” He could feel Brandon relax into him and sigh with relief. I wouldn’t have missed this for the world, Brian thought.

And then as he looked up he was almost surprised to see his daughter preparing to read the lesson from Luke. She took a deep breath to remind herself to read loudly and slowly, as her mother had coached her to do. Then she started in: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus...” She was such a young woman, her voice strong and sure.

But for some reason, Brian flashed back to the first time he had looked into those eyes... and the first time he had fed her at night, just the two of them awake and all the rest of the world sleeping... how time seemed to stand still... and she gazed up at him with an expression of perfect trust. He remembered how his heart had ached; he had never thought it would be possible to love anybody like this. Her tiny fingers gripped his hand as she worked at the bottle, and that moment was all there was.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord.” The timeless words and his daughter’s voice almost brought him back. There it is again: born a savior. “And this will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” This tiny, helpless thing, this timeless moment is our window to the deepest truth there is... and I want to give my whole heart in response. Love is born. Love is born.

“O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray.” Everybody around him was singing now, but Brian sat motionless, tears welling up in his eyes as he heard the words as for the first time: “cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.” Cast out our... cynicism? Cast out our... hardness of heart? And he found himself praying. “Please, God, could we try this again? Could we just sort of start over, you and I? I feel your love tonight: can this be a new beginning for us? Help me remember how to love again. Make me be an instrument of your love.

III.

“How did it go?” Karen asked as she heard Brian come in through the front door. “Was he there?”

“Yes, he was there. I noticed his car parked outside and so I took a chance that he was alone and he was. I guess he was working on his sermon for Sunday—it’s gotta be tough when Christmas is so late in the week—but

he didn't act as though I was interrupting him; more like he had all day. He didn't even seem surprised to see me. He said that he had a feeling when I was leaving on Christmas Eve that something was going on with me."

"Well? What happened?"

"I don't think I've ever seen him so relaxed. I tried to tell him what happened to me—as though I could understand it myself—and I thought he'd be surprised or skeptical; but he just said that he thought this was something I should trust and see where it takes me. He asked what happened the next day, whether I found myself praying about it, whether I still have the sense of wanting to make a new beginning with God, almost as though he'd been reading my mind. He asked if I've been wondering whether this is something real or just something I dreamed up, and I wondered how he knew to ask that. He said that this was the kind of experience a lot of people have, but they have trouble finding anybody to share it with so it ends up just sort of fading away. He said it had happened to him... more than once.

"I was surprised, you know, because he comes off as such an intellectual about faith; but he said that for him all the intellectual stuff just gives him permission to feel God, and it's the feeling that's the real place to start.

"Then somehow we got started talking about the carpet, and I've never seen him laugh so hard. That surprised me... kind of shocked me, really, and I asked him how he could laugh about behavior like that. He said, 'Well, either you laugh or you cry. Besides, we all have a good carpet brawl in us somewhere; you just never know what it's going to take to bring it out.' I suspect he's right about that."

Brian and Karen just sat for a long moment. "So what are you going to do?"

"We talked about that, and he told me to think about it for a while. But he said I might want to consider taking a leave of absence from the Board. There's a group of men who meet once a week to read books and talk about their faith, he said. And he said that that's a place where they'd appreciate my story, because a lot of them have stories of their own."

"Are you going to do that?"

"I'm not sure. I think maybe I might. All I know is that I think I'm onto something, and I don't want to let it go; and I don't want it to let go of me."

Amen

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