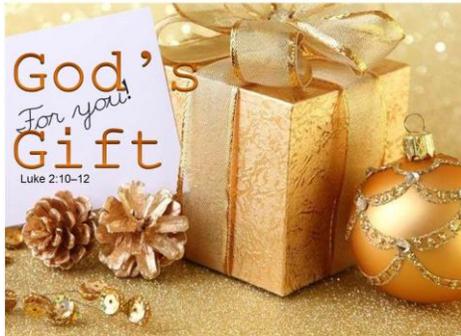


Sermon Christmas Eve, 2014

God's Gift for You

Luke 2:10–12



Dear Friends, this is Christmas! Merry Christmas!

Some time ago, a little two year boy died at the hospital. In that hospital room, the scene was saddening, yet in the midst of pain his Mom, let's call her Mary and his father let's call him Joseph held him and so did the grandparents as well. One of the things Mary said through her tears was, "How do people bear it who have no hope?"

Nearby in another room, two people were heard sobbing in each other's arms, because there was another death, and as you visualize them in your mind, a question pops up, "Do they have hope too?" You can't tell from the sobs. The hopeful and the hopeless both sob when someone precious is taken away from their lives. The difference is what you believe, actually, in whom you believe and have put your trust in.

Although, in our society today, there have been very sophisticated attempts to show that statements like Mary's are not based on the reality of God outside of us, but rather a God that is conceived in our own ideas, in our own imaginations. In other words, people like the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach said in 1841 that God is not a reality outside of us that we can trust and obey; instead he is a projection of our own needs onto reality. God does not create us; we create God.

They say people create God because they need to feel hope, they need to have something they can trust so they can bear the loss of a child for example, without that hope it will be unbearable, so they have the need to create God, but that's all.

But, dear friends, what is at the heart of the Christmas story is not the by-product of the human imagination based on real human needs, rather the manifestation of God himself through His Son, coming as a human, born of a virgin, and then dying for sinners that all who believe might have eternal life—The Son, the Gift, is not of human creation, but given by God the Father as a Gift in whom you can put all your trust.

This Gift was announced first to the most unlike of all people, shepherds! Shepherds who on that first Christmas night were with their sheep as they always did. Calm, quiet and even boring night. Boring was actually good, because it meant everything was ok. However that night turned out to be not like any other night because God had a surprise in store. It's rather interesting that God's surprises often come in the midst of darkness.

The Bible tells us that the creation was in utter darkness when God said, "Let there be light." And before sunrise, when it was still dark, our Jesus rose from the dead on the first Easter morning, ready to show himself to a few faithful.

Now, on this night, when most of Bethlehem was sleeping, a single angel appears to those shepherds with the startling announcement, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10–11).

That announcement, and everything that followed, is what we and Christians all over the world celebrate tonight. We celebrate because Jesus came as a gift from God, and God's Gift is for you!

Christmas celebrations have varied a great deal from time to time and from place to place. And in our Western culture, Christmas celebrations include such different elements as parties and plays, church and school events, caroling and cards, lights and trees, candles and Christmas dinners, to name just a few. It would be hard to imagine Christmas without some of these.

It might be hardest of all to imagine Christmas without any gifts given or received. Ever since the real St. Nicholas, that pastor of the Church in the fourth century who is said to have given anonymously the necessary gold enabling poor maidens to marry, Christians and now much of the world have given gifts at Christmas. Even where there is extreme poverty, parents try to find some kind of gift for their children. It may be the simplest toy or an article of homemade clothing. It may have been an orange when that was a rare luxury.

However, gifts do not make Christmas, any more than candles make a birthday. Christmas is all about Jesus. He is the one gift that truly matters. Without Jesus, we can have a holiday, but we cannot have a holy day, without Jesus, our Christmas is not truly merry and joyful, it can be happy, but not hopeful! Without the Gift of Jesus all other gifts are just that gifts, but Jesus is the perfect gift.

So who was this Jesus? What makes him such a perfect gift? The message of the angel to the shepherds spoke of something so great, yet so helplessly small. They would find this "Savior, who is Christ the Lord . . . wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:11-12). What God had already promised to Adam and Eve in the garden, and kept repeating through the prophets during all the previous centuries, had finally come to pass. Christ the Lord was born!

Born? The eternal God could be born? Yes, and that was the miracle of it. Not the by-product of the human imagination, but the very Creator of all things became a creature. He entered a human womb, there to grow and develop like any other baby, until the time came for him to enter the world, not in a grand pronouncement of his glory, but in the ordinary crying of any newborn baby. That, in fact, is how the shepherds were told they could recognize him. They would not find him in the king's palace in Jerusalem. He would not be surrounded by an entourage of religious dignitaries. Rather, "You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:12). The gift of God, in fact, God himself, came to us wrapped in diapers.

And why do we call him a gift? Obviously, because he was given. We did not create or invent him. Worse yet, we did not deserve that he come to us. Well, in a sense we did. We deserved that he come to reprimand us, to judge us, to condemn us. We deserved that he come with anger in his eyes and fire on his breath. Our human race was God's crowning act of creation but also his deepest disappointment, his proudest joy and his greatest heartache, because we disobeyed his will, sinning against him and against one another.

Why then was he given? The angel said it was to be our "Savior." Earlier, Joseph had been instructed, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Although the birth of Jesus was in a way the keeping of a promise, it was not yet its fulfilment. There was more to come. Jesus grew as a child,

matured into manhood, and after the completion of his earthly ministry went to the cross to offer himself as a sacrificial payment for the sins of the whole world. Thus, the old Christmas carol asks and answers the question that really gets to the heart of who this infant Jesus really was: "What child is this, who laid to rest, On Mary's lap is sleeping? . . . This, this is Christ the king, Whom shepherds guard and angels sing" (LSB 370:1). And then it continues, "Nails, spear shall pierce him through, The cross be borne for me, for you" (370:2). Those words remind us of the terrible reality of what Jesus did to save us from our sins. After thirty-three years of perfect obedience to his heavenly Father, the very ones he came to save became so enraged that they viciously killed him by nailing him to a cross. Little did they realize that by his innocent death, Jesus became the sacrificial offering to atone for the sins of the whole world, so that whoever believes in the saving work of Christ would receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

And today as we witness and remember that first Christmas, He, the Gift, calls us to see our own need, our need for forgiveness, our need for hope, true hope. After all we his creation have rebelled against him, yet he has mercy and love enough to welcome us back and restore that fellowship with him.

No, God is not a by-product of our imagination. Is a Gift from God the Creator and when people see the Gift for what it is, and trust Him, the result are there and impossible to ignore. Think about it, Its testimonies are too penetrating, its witnesses too diverse, its insights too high, its vision of divine things too wonderful, its authority too compelling, its love too rare, its Savior too radical that it should be the mere creation of sinful men.

Forgiveness and life purchased and won . . . so they can be given . . . as a gift . . . when God gives his gift of Jesus. As the Gospel of Mark 10:45 tells us: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." And for to happen the writer of Hebrews 2:14 tells us that "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil." In other words, the reason Christ took on human flesh was so that he could die and in dying pay a ransom and free us from the power of death.

Of all that the angels said to those shepherds in Bethlehem's field, nothing was more important than the two simple words "unto you." For what value does any gift have for you if it doesn't have your name on it or if it's not for you? Everything that Jesus did, he did for you. His perfect obedience was for you.

His innocent death, his glorious resurrection, and his eventual return to receive his own into his eternal presence—all of it was done for you.

John 3:16-17 tell us, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

Christmas means that God sent his Son so that we could believe and have eternal life. This is what Mary meant, in that hospital room holding her dead child: "How do people bear it who have no hope?" The hope she meant was eternal life. And that life is the gift of God through Jesus Christ, He won it for you!

The gift of Jesus was there for the lowly shepherds, as it was for the wise men as well. And today, the Lord assures us that his gift is "for you," whoever you are and

whatever your situation or station in life might be. It is for the homeless and the poor, for those on welfare and those barely getting by. It is there for the family in which husband and wife each hold down two jobs just to make ends meet, where the children wear hand-me-downs, and grocery shopping means a trip to the food bank. He did not come to fill your cupboard, but to fill you with the contentment and peace that comes because the Savior, who is Christ the Lord, is “for you.”

The gift is “for you” whose hearts are saddened at this time when there is so much outward merriment. It is for you who are chronically ill, wearied with doctor appointments and tests, overwhelmed with questions for which there seem to be no answers. “Unto you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” He doesn’t necessarily take away your illness, but he does give you the strength to bear it. And he does assure you that nothing can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

The gift is “for you” who celebrate Christmas with an empty place at the table because a loved one is no longer with you. Nothing can replace the loss of a mother or father, brother or sister, much less a child. Jesus doesn’t suddenly restore the one whom you’ve lost, but he comforts you with the assurance that those who die in the Lord continue to live with the Lord. For that reason, we shall not only see them again, but we also can live forever with them in the very presence of God and all who are his. And you can trust that to be true because “unto you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

The gift is also “for you” who already have everything you could desire, so that you will not “set [your] hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17). Things of this world do not last, but the gift of God, which is Jesus, is yours forever.

Whoever you are, therefore, and whatever your circumstances in life, this gift of the Savior is “for you.” It has your name on it. Whether you’re rich or poor, he is your true treasure. Whether you’re young or old, he is the only one whose days are without number. Whether you’re overwhelmed by loneliness or caught up in the crowd, he is the one who is your true friend and companion. And is your companion not only on this night, or tomorrow Christmas Day, but every day of your life, the questions is will you want and desire to be with him, and walk with him. Will you desire to carry this gift wherever you go?

Remember the words spoken here tonight, yours is the Gift, the life-giving gift that God has given you: “Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” This is God’s gift. Unwrap it. Embrace it. Own it. Above all, take it with you. It is your greatest treasure, is your hope, just like Mary and Joseph at the Hospital, and this hope is yours as well, it is for you! Amen.