

Christmas Gifts

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Christmas Eve, December 24, 2015
Advent: Visitations
Luke 2:1-15

ANNOUNCEMENTS

MESSAGE

Christmas is a time for gift giving here in America. For those of you who wait until the absolute last moment to buy your Christmas gifts. It's not too late, you can go to the Vineyard Bookstore and pick up a book or a Bible or a CD before you leave this evening. You'll probably get something better there than you would at the local Speedway.

The *New York Times* ran a column recently inviting readers to share stories of the worst Christmas gift they ever got. I don't know what the worst Christmas gift you ever got was, but see if it can compete with some of these. A man writes, "One year my elderly great aunt gave me a box of straws and my sister received a tube of mustard."

Mother-in-laws have a knack for buying awful gifts. One woman wrote, "My mother-in-law for years bought the other daughter-in-law the expensive make up or perfume, and I always got the free gift that came along with it."

One woman said, "My mother-in-law gave me a battery-powered cellulite massager. I was 26 and weighed 100 pounds at the time."

One woman said, "I should have known something was up when my ex-husband gave me an ice cube tray for Christmas."

One man said that he worked as a copy editor for a newspaper down in Alabama.

"When Christmas rolled around, I learned that the year-end bonus was \$5 for each year service. Because I had worked there for 7 months, my bonus was prorated. After taxes, my Christmas bonus totaled \$1.26. It was the first (and last) Christmas bonus that I could cash at an ice cream truck."

Of course there's always a Christmas story about what to give to the person who has everything. Here's a few gifts that husbands and wives can give to each other. Consider this Christmas buying the Hollandia Sleep System.

Slide: Picture

This bed features his and her built in remote control massagers and a Sony theater system with a retractable 32" flat-paneled HDTV/DVD/CD changer, 5 speaker surround sound, sub woofers, iPod docking station. It costs \$35,000. Why would you ever get out of bed if you had something like this?

Here is the best gift. This is something that I would actually love for Marlene to say, "Let's give a pair of these to each other this year." These are quad-skis.

Slide: Picture

They are sold exclusively through Neiman-Marcus. Only cost \$50,000 apiece. It's an amphibious machine. It starts off as an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) and it will morph into a jet ski in 5 seconds. Is that like the coolest gift ever?

Maybe you're into Urban Farming. You thought about getting a couple of chickens for your backyard in the suburbs. In 2012, Neiman-Marcus offered the Heritage Henhouse.

Slide: picture

It only costs \$100,000. It's a multi-level structure that features several rooms, including a chandelier. Neiman-Marcus even threw in the chickens for the Heritage henhouse.

You can tell someone's age by the kind of gift they may have received for Christmas as children. For example, if you got a hula hoop or a Davy Crockett hat, you are probably 5-10 years older than me.

Slide: Picture (Davy Crockett hat and hula hoop)

If you got a Mr. Potato Head with a real potato or a Chatty Kathy doll you are probably about my age.

Slide: Pictures

If you received a Cabbage Patch Doll or a Transformer as a child, you are likely my children's ages.

Slide: Pictures

And if you got an iPhone as a child, you're the age of my grandchildren.

Slide: Pictures

You know, you can tell a lot about a gift giver and what they think of you by just considering the Christmas gift they give you.

For example, if somebody gave me a pair of lifts for my shoes and a weight loss book, I know they must think I'm short and fat. In the famous Christmas story that I'm going to read today from the gospel of Luke, we can tell a lot about what God, the gift giver, is like and what He thinks of us by considering His Christmas gift.

I've called today's Christmas Eve message, "Christmas Gifts", let's pray.

Slide: Luke 2:1–15 (NIV)

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

I had a cousin in New York who lived right next to the railroad tracks in Brooklyn. When the train passed by her house, the windows would rattle and the noise was so loud that guests would stop talking. I remember once saying, “Gosh, that train is really loud.” My cousin said, “Oh, I didn’t notice.”

When you live with something for a really long time, even if it is unusual, you get so used to it that you don’t notice how remarkable it is. And that’s absolutely the case with the Christmas story we read here in Luke. If you’ve grown up with the story and you’ve heard it year after year perhaps for decades, you’ve gotten so used to it that you don’t notice how incredibly unusual it is. In fact, one reason that I believe this Christmas story actually happened is because it is so extraordinarily unusual.

See, the way that most religions or philosophies come to be is that someone takes an existing belief and modifies it a little bit. They add this idea; they subtract that one. And then someone else comes along and modifies it a bit more. And then 50 years later someone else changes it a little bit more. But the Christmas story, the notion of God becoming flesh, what Christians call the Incarnation, God becoming a man, has no precedent in world history. This story is like a bolt of lightning out of the blue. It is not just a modification of ideas that were floating around in the ancient Near East. This story sprang up out of nothing.

For those of you interested in history, in the Greco-Roman world the idea that God would become flesh absolutely contradicted a basic notion of the Greco-Roman worldview which held that the material world was polluted, or even evil. The idea that the Divine would become human, that God would become physical, was impossible to the Greco-Roman mind of the 1st century.

And it was even more unlikely that this story of God taking on human flesh would arise from among 1st century Jews living in Palestine. We always need to remind ourselves that this faith that we call Christianity arose entirely among Jews in the 1st century. All of Jesus' early followers were Jewish. Jesus was a Jew.

How many of you have ever seen the movie, "Fiddler on the Roof?"

SLIDE Picture of Fiddler on the Roof

You know that great song in Fiddler on the Roof, - Tradition, tradition... No one in the history of the world held more fiercely to their traditions than 1st century Jews. You want proof for the incarnation? Think about this – how in the world did this faith ever arise among Jewish people, if it wasn't true?

Jews had 2000 years of Jewish tradition telling them that Jews never bowed down and worshipped any human being as God. It is idolatry. It is blasphemy.

Many of you know that I was raised in a Jewish family. What you may not know is that I went to a Jewish parochial school when I was a child. And I remember my teachers telling us over and over again that the difference between us Jews and Christians was that Christians bowed down and worshipped human beings, whereas we Jews only bowed before God.

So what in the world would ever cause a Jewish man or Jewish woman to bow down before a man named Jesus and worship him as God? What could account for the throwing off of 2000 years of tradition?

What accounts for it is the story that we read here in the gospels is true. People experienced God through this man, Jesus. And in particular, they saw the power of God at work in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Because regular church-goers get so used to reading these stories, like my cousins got used to the window-rattling train that went by her house so much so that she didn't hear it anymore, regular church-goers need to work harder to recover the shock that people must have felt at hearing the story of Christmas for the first time.

Let's consider the Christmas gift that God gave the world at Christmas. I think as we consider God's Christmas gift, we can ask ourselves four questions. First, who are we given? Second, what does the gift say about us? Third, what does the gift say about God? Finally, how do we unwrap the gift?

Who are we given as a Christmas gift? We read two things in verse 11.

Slide: Luke 2:11 (NIV)

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

Who is the gift? Verse 11 says that we're given a Savior. The name Jesus is, as I mentioned a few weeks ago, the Greek version of the Hebrew Yeshua or Joshua. It means the Lord is salvation. What does it mean that Jesus is our Savior? What were the angels talking about when they said, "Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you who is the Lord?"

Again, the name Jesus means, "God saves" or the Lord saves. The founder of every other religion comes and says, "I'm from God to tell you what you must do to save yourself." But Christianity says something totally different. Christianity says that the founder of this faith, Jesus Christ, is God Himself.

Slide: Luke 2:11 (NIV)

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

If Jesus is God himself, He didn't come to just give us information. He could have given us information through someone else. But if God had to come Himself into the world, then this is Christianity's way of saying "You can't save yourself." Salvation is going to have to be something that God does. God is going to have to do it all. That's the only reason why God would have to come.

We know who the gift is, but what does the gift say about us? What the gift says about us is that we need to be saved. This is the hardest part of the Christian message for people to accept. Everyone loves Christianity's message of forgiveness and peace on earth and loving your neighbor as yourself. But the idea that we need to be completely 100% saved by God and we can't do anything at all to assist in that salvation – that's not popular! Again, this is the hardest part of becoming a Christian because when we understand what God had to do to save you or to save me, it thoroughly attacks our pride.

See, if the message of Christianity was, "Listen, you've got some things wrong in your life and you need to fix those things. You need to clean up your act a little bit." Or even if the message was "You've got a lot of things wrong with you and you've got to fix a whole bunch of things. And you've got to clean up your life a lot," if that was the message of Christianity, then we might be able to accept that. Every best-selling, self-help book tells us the same thing: you've got to fix things about yourself. But Christianity assaults our pride. Because the Christmas gift, the gift of God stepping into the world to be the Savior, says to you and me: we can do nothing to fix ourselves.

Salvation is not a 50/50 proposition, friend. God does his half and we do our half. It is not even 60/40. God does most of the work; and, we do some of the work. It is not even 99% God and 1% us. What the gift of Christmas, the gift of God taking on human flesh and becoming our Savior, says to us is that salvation is 100% God and 0% us.

Who is the gift? The gift is God himself, who has come into this world as the Savior.

What does the gift say about us? The gift tells us that we can't save or fix ourselves. To be saved, you have to stop relying on your own activity. To be saved, you have to stop relying on your own accomplishments. To be saved, you don't try to clean up your act or reform your behavior. To be saved, you have to be willing to be unproductive, at least in terms of your ability to fix your own life, or to get right with God. To be saved, you have to rely on the productivity, the activity, and the accomplishment of someone else – namely, Jesus, who is God the Savior. You have to pin your faith utterly and completely on what God has done in and through his son, Jesus. Instead of relying on what you can do to fix yourself, you've got to rely on what Jesus has done in dying on a cross to pay for your sins, and in rising from the dead to give you power to change.

We've discovered who the gift is. It is Jesus Christ, the Savior. We've discovered what the gift says about us. We can't save ourselves. We need to rely completely on the work of Christ. But what does the gift tell us about God? And how do we unwrap the gift?

Let me finish with a story.

Philip Yancey, a Christian author, wrote a fabulous book called "What's So Amazing About Grace," in which he included the following story:

SLIDE

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. "I hate you!" she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away to Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch and arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for a month, two months, a year. The man with the big car – she calls him "Boss" – teaches her a few things that men like. Since she's underage, men pay a premium for her. She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring and provincial that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

After a year the first signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean. "These days, we can't mess around," he growls, and before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name. When winter blows in she finds herself

sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. "Sleeping: is the wrong word – a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She pulls her legs right underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled on top of her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

'God, why did I leave', she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart. 'My dog back home eats better than I do now.' She's sobbing, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, "Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada."

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, "Fifteen minutes, folks. That's all we have here." Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice. If they're there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty relatives - brothers and sisters, great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They're all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads: "Welcome home!"

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her Dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech, "Dad, I'm sorry. I know..."

He interrupts her. "Hush, child. We've got no time for that. No time for apologies. You'll be late for the party. A banquet's waiting for you at home."

What does the story tell us about the God who gave us the Christmas gift of coming into this world as our Savior? The story tells you that God could not love you anymore than he does right now. God is not waiting for you to clean up your act, or to do something religious in order to be in relationship with you. God has done everything necessary to restore his relationship with you. God wants to give you right now the gift of his love and forgiveness, if you will just come to him and ask him for it. God wants to welcome you home – into his family!

The way you unwrap the gift is that you first of all admit that you need a Savior. Admit that you can't fix yourself and ask him to fix you. Second, you stop running from God, going your own way, and instead you turn back to him.

And for some of you that means coming home this Christmas. You used to have a relationship with God that was making a real difference in your life. But like the woman in the story, you just went your own way and now you need to come back home, and turn back to God.

And third, you just need to trust him. Trust that God's plan of salvation, entering this world as a baby on Christmas, growing up and living a perfect life, dying for our sins on the cross and rising from the dead to defeat death and to offer us the gift of eternal life - trust that God's plan of salvation will work in your life. God is a great gift-giver. This Christmas, he wants to give you the gift of himself if you will receive him.

- At the end of the message, invite people to pray to receive Christ. Right where they are, nobody standing.
- I'd like all of you here today to pull out the bulletin you received when you came today. There are two groups of you that I'd ask to fill out the "Connect with us" section:
- First, if you just prayed with me to receive Christ for the first time, or to begin a relationship with Christ again.
- Second, if you're visiting with us for the first time this Christmas
- If you've filled out the bulletin, please bring it to the table in the lobby with the sign that says "Welcome Gift". You can also fill out the connect section there if you don't have a bulletin. We have a small gift and a free booklet called, 'Why Jesus?' for you to pick up. It's our gift to you today if you have questions about Christianity, or if you prayed to receive Christ into your life just now.

Let's pray.