

The Gift That Keeps On Giving

December 24, 2013

Luke 2:1-20

This is one of the most wonderful times of the year...it's Christmas Eve and many are waiting with anticipation to see what gifts we get.

Many are wrapped in beautiful wrapping paper, and then decorated with bows, and tinsel, and pretty ribbons

And the sad part is, there almost seems like a let down after you have unwrapped all of your gifts

Not because you didn't get what you wanted...but there is something magical about unwrapping those gifts in anticipation and excitement as to what lies beneath all the pretty wrappings.

Christmas is about gifts, and the reason for that has its roots in the fact that we are celebrating God's great gift to the world – the gift of a Redeemer, a gift that makes it possible for us to live in the presence of God forever.

And while we can look at all those pretty wrapped Christmas gifts we get and wonder what may be inside, there are things that we can know for sure about God's gift.

Let's take a look at that gift this evening as we are on the doorstep of the celebration of Christmas.

We just heard Luke's account of the very familiar "Christmas Story." It's a beautiful story. But, and this is repeating some of what I wrote for our newsletter this month, and have said many times, we must not get bogged down in the details of the story. It is WHAT happened that is significant, not precisely HOW it happened.

First, let us understand that when Jesus came...He gave us all...AN INSTANT GIFT.

Because of the birth of this baby...because of the life that existed in Him...we all instantly received the gift of life...to never have to die again

In Matthew's account of things, we read that a message about Mary came to Joseph in a dream, a message that he should not hesitate to go through with his plans to marry Mary. "She will give birth to a son," the message said, "and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Then Matthew, since he was writing especially to the Jews, relates all this to Old Testament prophecy as he quotes Isaiah, "The maiden will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

Neither Mark nor John, in their gospels, mention any details of the birth. John simply tells us that the Word became flesh, and lived among us.

It is an instant gift that God promises to all who would ask for it.

And not only was this gift an instant gift...but it was a wrapped gift that...TAKES A LIFETIME TO UNWRAP.

When we get to the tree on Christmas morning and start unwrapping gifts, or whatever your family tradition might be, we usually tear into them with gusto and it's all over very quickly.

But when Jesus was born it was just the beginning of the gift unwrapping. Every day we wake up, we get to unwrap another part of the gift of eternal life that God has prepared for us.

Every day gives us the opportunity to unwrap the mind and spirit of Christ in our lives – to bring forth peace, love, joy, faith, kindness, understanding, application.

Paul understood that this gift would take a lifetime to unwrap. That's why he said in Phil 2:12, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with reverence and fear."

Now, don't misunderstand. Paul is not saying that we work to earn our salvation...He is saying that there is so much of God's salvation to unwrap that it will take the work of a lifetime to unwrap it all.

No matter how long we live, we can experience the words of the writer of Lamentations: "The faithful love of the Lord never ends; his mercies never cease; they begin afresh each morning.."

There's another thing about the gifts we give at Christmas. So many times we are worried about the cost – not so much whether we can afford it, although that may be a concern.

But more likely will the recipient think we spent enough, or in the case of a family with more than one child, are the children "equalized" – are they each getting approximately the same dollar value in their gifts. We do worry about value it comes to our gifts.

But who can begin to put a price on the gift that God has given us through Jesus the Christ? We can say that it is a gift of ENORMOUS VALUE. But would that even come close to describing it? The Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 9:15, Thank God for this gift too wonderful for words.

The Shepherds realized what an enormous gift they had been given. Verse 20 in our gospel reading this evening says that “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Later on, the wise men understood, as they tried to bring gifts to present to a King. They knew that His life was worth much more than gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but this was all they could come up with.

What gift can compare to the entire forgiveness of all sin, completely removing those things which separate us from God, and enabling us to live an eternity in God’s presence, in the glory of which John was given a glimpse in the book of the Revelation?

It is indescribable at best.

And it is of unmeasurable value...it was the greatest gift ever given...and cost more than anything ever could

And yet, it was given to each and every one of us FREELY...it costs us nothing.

You know, often this time of year at Christmas parties, groups will play a game called Dirty Santa. It’s fun – we’ve played it at some of our Sunday School parties here at St. Paul.

Each person in turn picks out a wrapped gift, and after opening it, can decide whether to keep it or take one of the other already-opened gifts instead.

It’s interesting to see the decisions people make about what to keep or not keep. Many times when we get things that are precious to us...that are of enormous value, whether dollar or sentimental, or maybe both, we want to keep them for ourselves.

But that’s not what Jesus wants us to do with the gift of enormous value he brings...He doesn’t want us to keep it but He wants us to GIVE IT AWAY.

This gift that we have been given that takes a lifetime to unwrap was meant for us to give to others. It is not just our gift, an exclusive gift, but it is a gift for all to receive.

Again, looking at our gospel reading, the Shepherds in the field realized this. “After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished.”

And that is our call - to spread the word of what we have been given, and have seen, and been told about this indescribable gift – not just with talk, but with a life that shows the world that Jesus Christ is real to us.

And one more thing about Christmas gifts – the ones we give. Often, we will shop for “just the right thing” for mom or dad or Uncle Joe or granddad or the kids.

We usually want a gift to be tailored just for the recipient, and will often spend a lot of time thinking about and finding something just for them.

And it is often the case that a gift that would mean so much to one might have very little meaning for someone else.

But this gift from God that we celebrate tonight and tomorrow, this gift that takes a lifetime to unwrap, this indescribable gift, truly...ENRICHES THE LIFE OF EVERYONE WHO GETS IT.

I think I can truthfully say that I have never encountered anyone in all my years who said, “since I committed my life to follow Christ my life is worse than it was before.”

Why? Because God’s gift of salvation is meant to enrich the life of everyone who will receive it.

It enriched the lives of the Shepherds that day. The shepherds returned, Luke tells us, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

They realized their life would never be the same again from that day forward

Such is the same response to all who embrace the gift of the Christ-child.

Listen to the words of God speaking through the prophet Jeremiah: “For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “they are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.”

Yes...this gift that takes a lifetime to unwrap, enriches every life that receives it

I know many of us can’t wait to unwrap those gifts that await us under the tree, and I hope you will enjoy that experience to the fullest.

But I want to remind us all that the unwrapping of the most precious gift of all is not just to be unwrapped once on Christmas day, but it is a gift that is meant to be unwrapped everyday...for the rest of our lives.

The child whose birth we celebrate was a gift that Luke tells us was wrapped in swaddling clothes

But as we unwrap that gift we all can see that it is...

A gift that is instantly ours when we receive it
A gift that takes a lifetime of unwrapping
A gift that was of Enormous value
A gift that is to be given away
A gift that enriches every life that receives it

May we all cherish this gift as we take the time everyday to unwrap it in our lives.