

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2019
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us ...* Isaiah 9:6

Those words from Isaiah remind us that a gift is given this Christmas.

The giving of gifts, of course, is a preoccupying concern this time of year. In the weeks leading up to this night, many of you have been anxious about what it is you will be giving to someone you love. Play it safe and follow a list? Take a chance and go off-script? It could go wrong either way. Of course, it could go very right.

Finally tonight you can let go of that burden. For better or for worse, it's too late now to do anything more. Not even Walmart will open again until after Christmas. So enjoy the moment.

What has been done has been done;
what has not be done has not been done;
let it be.

Let it be ... and savor this moment. But know this: it will not last. No sooner is one burden lifted than another will take its place. Because soon (and very soon) you will have to worry about the other side of the gift-giving coin – and that, of course would be the *gift-getting*.

And what *WILL* you do with some of the gifts you will inevitably be getting?

One day last week, Barb and I received a package from our daughter. We pulled out two gifts, a box for each of us, each beautifully wrapped. I quipped, "Ooh, matching eight balls!"

A couple of days later, Barb speculated further, "I wonder what our kids are giving us this year that we won't know what to do with?"

I'm reminded of a piece written by Garrison Keillor a number of years back. It's an amusing reflection on the perilous prospect of receiving gifts we may not want:

A few years ago, someone near and dear gave me a Polo shirt for Christmas, and I said thank you, of course, and put it on, and tried to look pleased, but what I was thinking was, "Burgundy?" In my experience, burgundy shirts are worn by guys who smoke cigarillos, drive Buick LeSabres, sit in the dark corners of cocktail lounges and place large wagers on basketball games. I'm more of a wheat type of person. Wheat or antique blue.

But did I turn to the giver and say, “Sorry, I’m an English major and we don’t wear this color?” No. I put it in a special section of my closet where I keep never-to-be-worn clothes. After the three-month Christmas-gift cooling-off period required by law, I gave the shirt to a shelter for the homeless. I hope it’s being worn by someone, and yet I can imagine a homeless person being offered this shirt and saying to the volunteer, “You wouldn’t have something in a pale green or aqua would you?” Just because you’re homeless doesn’t mean you look good in burgundy.¹

Finding the right gift to give can be a challenge. Finding the grace to accept a gift that seems less-than-ideal may be every bit as difficult.

And the greatest challenge, as Garrison Keillor goes on to clarify, is coming to grips with what the gifts we receive say about who we are – or at least how another person perceives us to be:

A Christmas gift represents somebody’s theory of who you are, or who they wish you were, and of course, we know how to handle the wildly inappropriate gift from a stranger, but what if you see yourself as a suave dude and a swift intellect and then one year your wife – your *wife* – gives you a pair of singing undershorts that perform “O Tannenbaum” when you sit down and a battery-operated coin bank in which a little farmer picks up the coin in his pitchfork and hoists it into the silo? That’s when you go through a sort of identity crisis.

You’d like to get a gift that aims high – Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, a ticket to Nepal ... – and instead here is a pair of bedroom slippers with lights in the toes so you can see your way to the bathroom at night, or a rubber ball on a paddle. Not the kind of thing an inquiring mind would spend a lot of time with.

But there is another possibility. Sure, as Garrison Keillor worries, a gift *may* convey the horrifying message that the one who gives it thinks you – or me – a doofus or a nerd. But there is another possibility.

For a gift, you see, may convey the entirely unexpected message that the one who gives it regards you – or me – rather more highly than any of us might ever have imagined. Those who love us may leave us stunned by the gifts they give.

And it is this other possibility that brings us to this night.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Luke 2:8-11

The first gift of that first Christmas was given first of all to shepherds. That doesn't exactly surprise us, because we've heard this story before. But it most certainly would have surprised them, which is why the very first thing the angel tells them is, "Do not be afraid."

If they had had an opportunity to think about it, they could scarcely have expected such a gift ... they, least of all. Never mind that King David was himself a shepherd once, theirs was not an honorable profession. Then, as now, those who worked the late shifts were regarded as shifty. Working day and night – moving from place to place – shepherds were not to be trusted. If cleanliness is next to godliness, what to make of dirty shepherds who sleep and eat with smelly sheep day in and day out?

But as tonight's gospel tells it, this gift of Christmas is the gift is given to *them* ... to "certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay." *They* are the ones who first glimpse the significance of what they have been given. And so, at the end of the night, when it's time to return to the fields, it is the shepherds who go forth "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:20).

For reasons that defy their every expectation, they are more highly-esteemed than they would have had any reason to believe possible. And they know it because of the gift they are given: "a child wrapped" – *gift-wrapped* – "a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

Later on in Luke's gospel, that same gift – which is Jesus – is given to those, like the shepherds, who have not the least reason to expect it:

fishermen along the shore who cast their nets;
a leper along the side of the road who begs for relief;
the tax collector who takes advantage of his own people;
the harlot who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears;
the crazy man who lives in the cemetery;
the woman with hemorrhages who desperately reaches out to touch Jesus;
little Zacchaeus who climbs up a tree to get a better look at the rabbi passing by.

And on it goes.

And on it goes to this very day. And still we are told, "Do not be afraid." Not all gifts will leave us mortified and dismayed. Here this night, at least, the gift that is given us is given to tell us of One who thinks more of us than we might hope or imagine.

This is the heart of our celebration this night. God, the giver of all gifts, gives us a gift that is intended not to take us down a peg or two, but to raise us to a new way of seeing ourselves and a new way of seeing every person we will ever meet anywhere. God, the giver of all gifts, gives a gift intended to stun us, a gift intended to leave us with a clear message that we are esteemed in ways we might scarcely have imagined:

*For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us ...*

All our songs this night are songs of joy – complete, unrestrained joy – and gratitude for this gift we are given.

Before we go home and unwrap any of the other gifts of Christmas, we would do well to unwrap this one gift first of all, the gift that insists we are God’s beloved ones. On this night, we are in great company. Not just the company of friends and family, we are companions with the shepherds in their fields. And, with them, we are joined by the heavenly hosts – angels and archangels and all the saints of God.

In this Feast of Christmas, we celebrate God’s reaching out to all humankind, none of us too smelly, none of us too ordinary, none of us too dirty, none of us too despicable, none of us too scorned, none of us too crazy, none of us too inappropriate, none of us too ridiculous. In this Feast of Christmas, we celebrate the stunning good news that God loves us all. And at the end of this Feast of Christmas, may we go forth, to return to our homes “glorifying and praising God for all [we have] heard and seen,” all that we have been given.

¹ I first came across Garrison Keillor’s essay many years ago. I had forgotten just how many years it had been until I did an internet search and found it @ <http://brecheen.org/cbrecheen/WhatImGivingYouForChristmas.htm> - from a Lands End catalog (Dec. 1998?).