

December 24 – The Perfect Gift

Luke 2:1-20

During the month of December, as we have been preparing our hearts and lives to again celebrate the birth of Jesus, we have been looking at the meaning of this event through the words of some of our familiar carols. One of my favorites is, “In the Bleak Midwinter.” It was written by Christina Rossetti in the late 1800’s. She had come with her family from Italy to England. A gifted poet she universalizes the biblical narrative of Christ’s birth by transferring the scene at Bethlehem to a snowy Victorian Christmas. If it had been this cold and wintry, and it can snow in Jerusalem, the shepherds would not have been out in the fields. They would have brought the sheep to the sheepfolds for safekeeping. But cold and snowy weather was her experience at Christmastime even if that was much different from what she experienced as a girl in Italy. It was this she immortalized in this carol.

What I like about this familiar hymn is that it shares the important meanings of tonight using the image of gifting. Most of us have spent much time this month focusing on buying presents. Don’t we all want to, at least once in a while, give the perfect gift? You know what I mean? We want to be the one that find the gift that is hard to come by, or is so perfect that family members will remember it for years. It is partly this desire that fuels the commercialism of this season. When I think about this compulsion that most of us have, at least in some measure, I think of the movie “Jingle All the Way” starring Sinbad and Arnold Schwarzenegger. It is the story of two dads battling each other as they try to purchase a Turbo Man doll for their son. It was that year’s hottest item and now it is Christmas Eve and no store has it in stock. It is a hilarious farce as they compete with each other for what they perceive to be the perfect gift. They learn in the end that what their son’s really want is love and time with them.

How are you feeling about what you put under the tree this year? Did you purchase the perfect gift that everyone will be talking about? Did you get your shopping done early or were you at the stores until five minutes before leaving for church?

Gift-giving has always been a part of the nativity story. We think about the wise men coming to present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The words of this carol cause us to focus on the more important gift, the one God gives us. That gift is the gift of God's presence. In the carol Christina carefully juxtaposes the simple, earthly elements—wind, water, snow, with the glory of the incarnation—heaven cannot hold him. She wanted us to hear and celebrate the very heart of the Christmas story: might made humble, Word become flesh, God with us.

What does that mean for us? I can think of many ways you could answer that question but mostly it means to me that God understands what I am going through in life. God in Christ has experienced temptations, doubt, frustration and all the rest. I don't have to try and explain it, I know God understands. That is so comforting. I am reminded of a time I felt that presence so completely on this night. Jenny and I were just married. We were in Georgia, a long way from home. It was our first Christmas together but also our first away from family. I have to admit that homesickness was there. I was working as a youth leader for a large church. The tradition at that time was to not have Christmas Eve services but Christmas morning services at that church. We both had grown up with candlelight Christmas Eve services and so I started calling to find one. I soon realized that in the south, at this time most of the United Methodist Churches did not have a Christmas Eve service. This has since changed. I finally found one. It was a mostly black congregation made up generally of people who had moved from the north for work, so they had brought their tradition of candlelight services with them. When we got there we were a bit nervous but were welcomed so graciously. I still remember the pastor's sermon. It was about how Mary must have felt that night so far from family and having a baby. He went on to say, "But God was with her." As we lit candles and sang the pain of homesickness evaporated. Even though we were far from home with people we had never met, it felt right, it was a gift, God's presence. I knew God understood what I was feeling. That is part of the story of this night.

We all come with a mixture of emotions. We have joys, but we also have worries. God is right here with us, saying trust me, together we will get through it. This is the gift God gives us.

The carol also celebrates the gifts of the shepherds, the wise men and of Mary. It roots God's story in the midst of our story. We see how each one let the love of God overflow in acts of generosity. The shepherds, after hearing from the angels, go to Bethlehem and, in the carol, offer a lamb as a way of saying thanks to the God who comes to simple folk like them. The wise men follow a star and upon seeing the child offer their gifts. Gifting is a way of acknowledging how God was at work in the world and the joy they felt at being involved. And Mary, most of all, does what every mother does, she kisses her child. There is nothing more simple and yet profound. God in heaven comes to earth to share love and what does God receive? Love, the uncomplicated overflowing gift of love any parent bestows upon their newborn. It was a greater gift than all the sacrifices and prayers of thanksgiving that God had received.

The carol also talks about when he comes to reign. We come to celebrate the baby born in a manger but also to wish for his coming fully in our hearts and lives. Tonight is more than remembering a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem but also a yearning for the time to come when Christ's message of peace will reign.

The song ends by challenging us by asking how we are to respond to the gift of God's love for us. We too, like the shepherds, wise men and Mary are to give a gift. Have you ever thought, "What is the perfect gift that we can give to God?" Is there that gift that would cause God to say, "Wow, they really know me. This is awesome!" Yes, there is such a gift. We are told that the most important thing we can give is possessed by even the most impoverished soul. We are challenged to give to God our heart. What does that mean?

If you have never given your life to Jesus, tonight is a chance. In the quietness of this place just say to yourself, "Thank you Jesus for coming to be born. Thank you for your love. I welcome you."

If you come feeling empty, tonight is a chance for you to be open anew to that presence in your life. In the quietness of this place just say to yourself, "Thank you Jesus for filling me anew with love and hope." In renewing your commitment to God you are giving God your heart.

Finally, if you come feeling full of joy tonight it is a chance for you to commit to giving to others. In the quietness of this place just say to yourself, "Thank you Jesus for all you have given me. Show me how to pay it forward to another." Remember, Jesus, when asked what it meant to love God fully, said that it also means for us to love our neighbor as our selves. What can you do to give back to others in the days to come? This is your gift to God.

A woman tells this story. Mike, her husband hated the commercial side of Christmas. He grudgingly went through the motions of enjoying himself on Christmas morning. She always wanted to find that perfect gift that would make him smile. When their oldest son was a teenager he was in a private wrestling club. They had a meet against a team sponsored by an inner city church. The children on the other team didn't have the proper equipment. Most alarming they didn't have the protective headgear. Her son's team won every weight division. Mike was so sorry that not one of the children on the other team won. He talked about how something like that could demoralize a team. Mike had coached many teams and loved kids. The next day she went to a sports store and bought a bunch of wrestling equipment and sent it anonymously to the church. She put a white envelope in the tree telling Mike what she had done. When he opened up that letter the smile on his face was like nothing she had ever seen. The white envelope became a tradition. Every year it was the last gift opened. Even the kids would stop playing with their new toys when Mike opened the letter. It was fun for her to think about what to do in Mike's name. This past year Mike passed away of cancer. She could hardly get the tree up, so great was her grief, but she put an envelope in the tree in Mike's name because she knew the three kids were coming home and would expect it. The next morning there were four envelopes in the tree. Each child, without consulting the others, had made a donation of something in Mike's name. She wrote this saying what joy she has knowing that the tradition of the white envelope will continue to Mike's grandchildren and maybe even farther.

The perfect gift has been given and we are asked to pass it along. We accept God's perfect gift and give to God our heart.