

Dec 24 – Christmas Eve

Our Gift

Luke 2:1-20

What was the best Christmas present you ever received? Since you are in church, you know that the correct answer to that question is, “Jesus.” And we will talk about this, the greatest of all gifts and what it means for each of us. But just for a moment, let your mind wander back over all those Christmases you have experienced, the anticipation, wondering if you were going to get that something special you had been asking for. Do you remember the joy when the wrapping paper came off and there it was? Or even more, was there a time when you opened a gift and what you held in your hands was totally unexpected yet wonderful? Growing up, I always thought the best part of Christmas was the presents I received and, over the years, I had those special gifts, like the bike I had wanted or the camera I had asked for. Later, as gifts have come from children and grandchildren they bring me even greater joy. It isn't the gift, but the smiles, the look of anticipation and joy on their face in the giving. Yes, we can all recall the joy of receiving.

There is an even greater joy, I found. It is the joy that comes in giving gifts. As I said, I see that joy in my children and now grandchildren. I realize now that some of the greatest joy of the season is in planning for and the giving of gifts to those I love. The memory of the smiles and squeals of joy and the hugs received this year will stay with me long after any gift has been used, consumed and discarded.

The Legend of the Christmas Rose is about the joy of giving and receiving. Let me share a bit about it again. It begins with Madelon, a shepherd girl tending her sheep. She does not see the angels or hear their tiding to the shepherds of “Good News!” Yet, she becomes aware that something unique has happened. The other shepherds have left their flocks to go to Bethlehem. Upon returning they tell her of all that had happened. Their joy was a gift. To add to the sense of excitement and wonder she sees the wise men also headed towards Bethlehem. In the story she does not talk to them, but such a group moving at night towards Bethlehem at the same time angels had proclaimed the birth of the Messiah, would cause her to believe that the two events are related. Finally,

she can stand it no longer. She too wants to see this baby. So we have her going to Bethlehem. She peeks in the window of the stable and sees Mary and Joseph and the baby. Perhaps the wise men were still there as well. The joy of this fills her, but then she feels crushed. She has no gift to give. She would like to draw closer but this lack keeps her rooted in place. Great tears begin to flow. Though it doesn't say so in the legend, in my mind's eye the angel that comes to her is the great Archangel Gabriel who, legend tells us, had come to Mary to announce that she was to give birth. The same one who appeared to Joseph in a dream. Legend has it that it was he who proclaimed the Good News to the Shepherds. Yes, I want to believe that this very important angel was not so caught up in his importance or the importance of the moment that he took time to help a small shepherd girl. He hears her pain and, in love, turns her tears into the rose. He wanted all to feel they could approach the manger. He wanted nothing to hold one back. For Madelon, some gift was needed. She did not want to just receive, but to give. And so the roses are given, Mary smiles and the little girl is beckoned to approach the manger. Again, in my mind's eye she does what any of us does around a baby. She holds out her finger and the Lord of all the universe grasps it and squeezes it. She feels the greatest love any will ever know. A love still offered to us.

We often use the word "Emmanuel" on this night. It means, "God with us." Jesus is God's gift to us. But even more, It is God saying I am invested in each of your lives. Through this birth the world has changed. Even more, this birth changed God. Through the life of Jesus, God came to understand fully what it means to be human. God learned about what it means to be hungry and in need. God, in Christ, experienced temptation. He dealt with the feelings of disappointment when trusted friends betrayed him, denied him and ran away. And yes, he experienced pain and death. Many of the most trying things that are part of being human God understands because of Jesus. But let us not forget that in becoming human God came to understand fully the love a mother has for her child, to see the joy in one who was lost but now is found, the emotions when one learns they are forgiven. God learned first-hand the most awesome things that come to us because of being human. So we celebrate Emmanuel, God entering into the world. God understands us, loves us and is one with us because of this great gift. Like all gifts

given it brightens the life of the one receiving it but also brings great joy to the one giving it. Jesus birth gave God great joy!

God's gift found in a manger in Bethlehem is still our gift. Whenever one receives Christ God feels great joy. Whenever one reconnects with God, learns something new, finally is able to forgive, to love more fully without prejudice, to follow the example of God's son Jesus in greater completeness, God is filled with joy. Think about that for a moment. You have the potential, right now this moment to give God joy. To let the giver of the greatest gift feel happy because you have received it and are using Jesus' words in your life is yours to give.

We are invited to draw near anew to the manger. We are reminded by our story and by Jesus that that no one is left out. Sometimes we keep our distance. We feel some lack in our lives. We believe God could not really forgive us because of the guilt we have over some past deed. Or that we cannot really forgive another because of what they have done. We feel unloved or unworthy. If this is you, let God transform your tears of repentance and lack into gifts of joy. If you have drawn close in the past but feel like your faith is more routine than it should be let God's love fill you again with awe. Think of yourself at the manger. Let the Lord of life grab your little finger and feel awe as you experience the incredible love of God with you anew. And if you are one who is journeying through life wondering whether or not you really want or need a personal relationship with God, hear the good news that God loves you and invites you to open your heart and receive that love.

The word we need to hear, all of us, is that God wants us to receive God's love. We need to realize that this gift of Jesus is ours now and always.

In closing let me share a Christmas story sharing how this gift can change our lives. He had lived a tough life full of broken relationships. His work had caused him to move often and his personality had led to three different marriages ending in divorce. He had three children but had not had much contact with any of them. He had lived an independent life and enjoyed not having to worry about anyone but himself. This year, finally age and life choices had begun to catch up with him. He had had some health issues. They were nothing significant but all of a sudden he felt much more vulnerable.

For the first time in his life he thought about what it might be like as he aged. He mentioned some of this to a friend who invited him to church. He hadn't been to church in decades, why now? His friend responded that here he would find love and support. He finally went one Sunday. In writing he said, "The music was good, the sermon wasn't half bad, and the homemade cookies were great." He returned. Over the next few months, he began to look forward to church. Over a couple of years, that connection with church caused him to volunteer to help others. It finally caused him to reach out to his children and begin to build some bridges of relationship with them. In the article he wrote about this he says, "I am so thankful for the gift of my church and faith. I made lots of mistakes but that is in the past, I have done what I can to make amends. Today is good and however many tomorrows I have, I look forward to them." He wrote this after Christmas when, for the first time in his life, he had his son and two of his grandchildren with him for the holidays and for worship. He said it would not have happened without God and the church. It was the best gift I ever received.

So know God knows what you are going through, what you are feeling. God invites you anew to connect or deepen the connection you have. Come to the manger. Receive the gift of love. Share that love and know God, Emmanuel is with us.