

“Open Up---Yourself”

2 Samuel 7:1-3, Luke 2:1-7

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During the advent season, we have been reflecting about the meaning of Christmas with the theme of “gift”. People love presents, especially at Christmas, the season of giving and receiving gifts. I realized that even my two year old baby, Jacob, likes presents. He likes to open up the boxes and wants to see what is inside. I heard a joke saying that the month of December is the only month of the year where everybody forgets the past, forgets the future, and remembers only ‘the present’. I am very curious why people like gifts. Do you think a gift is really free of charge? In my guess, when we receive a gift, we are affirmed that we are remembered. I am a meaningful person to someone and I am validated and valued by people. These feelings bring us encouragement, reward and good self-esteem. Christmas is the season to celebrate God’s special gift, which is “Emmanuel.”

A lot of people think that “gift giving” tradition comes from the three wise men story in the Bible. As we all know, three wise men brought their special gifts to the baby Jesus: gold, Frankincense, and myrrh. Frankincense is used in perfumery and aromatherapy. Myrrh is an expensive spice, used for making perfume, incense, medicine, and for anointing the dead. Gold obviously is a symbol of wealth. I am not sure whether these expensive gifts would match up with Mary and Joseph’s life situation. They couldn’t find any room to stay. So when Mary delivered baby Jesus, she had to wrap the baby Jesus in a blanket and lay him in a manger. I would like to think that the baby Jesus was born in a luxurious and comfortable hotel room instead of a stable. Why did the wise men bring such expensive gifts? Because these gifts represent how much they had awaited and admired the birth of baby Jesus, their new Messiah. These gifts were tokens of the givers’ hearts.

As a matter of fact, the first gift was not one of these three wise men’s gifts, but God himself was the first to us. The Bible reminds us that “God so loved the world that he *gave* his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).” Our Wesleyan theology adds one more important point to this special gift of Jesus Christ. Revelations 3:20 says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” We do not only receive the gift of Jesus Christ, but we also invite him to dwell in us. In our Christian faith, receiving the gift of Jesus Christ is not the end of God’s gracious love and

mercy, but a great beginning to be with God in our journey. Our prayers don't invite God's presence. Jesus said, "I'm already here, knocking." Our prayers only recognize the reality that God is here with us and pursuing a relationship with each of us. So Christmas is a wonderful and amazing gift to us because God himself incarnated the human being to be with us. Isn't it a shocking and miraculous event? Do you understand this miracle? We should not confuse the Christmas story with any fairytale.

How biblical is the Christmas we know? Pastor Michael Slaughter challenges us in his book, "Christmas Is not Your Birthday," that many Christmas traditions that we hold are really mixtures of traditions: starts with a little biblical truth, blends with some eighteen-century Victorian practices, and adds a double shot of Santa theology. Even our Christmas hymns present a sanitized version of a rather traumatic event: "The cattle are lowing, the poor baby wakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." Who can relate to the experience of having a newborn who never cried? The real Christmas was a snapshot of poverty and anxiety, not feel-good warm fuzzies. Somehow we grew up with a distorted, acculturated picture of a feel-good Santa Claus Jesus. Jesus was born in a stable, a cave where animals were kept. Wherever there are animals, there are dung, flies, and bad smells. Clearly, the setting of Jesus' birth was not sanitary. He argues that our Christmas traditions have sanitized the Jesus birth narrative by removing the event from its biblical and historical context. The stable symbolizes our mess, bitter reality, and real struggles in our lives. It is easy to feel excited about a newborn warmly wrapped in a manger bed of straw. God didn't have come down to us. Why does God humble himself? The message of Christmas is about a sacrificial gift. God became a human being to be a blessing to us.

Think about Jesus' bed of straw. Someone shared a wonderful picture with me which shows a manger with a title, "THE VERY FIRST KING-SIZED BED."



THANK GOD FOR THAT BED AND THE BABY WHO SLEPT THERE

- The best place to be: in someone's thoughts
- Safest place to be: in someone's prayers
- Best place to be: in God's Hands

Let us look at our Old Testament reading. This illustrates David's compassionate attitude and gives us a clue of Christian faith. In the reading, God gave King David peace from all his enemies. He enjoys making himself comfortable in a luxurious house, but he still thinks about God who sits in a

plain tent. The prophet Nathan reminds him that “whatever is on your heart, go and do it. God is with you.” God speaks to us in our “palaces” or “tents”. David’s attitude should be ours this Christmas, thinking about giving God our best.

Our New Testament story reports how Mary and Joseph ended up staying at a stable. Imagine if you were in Mary and Joseph’s shoes, this was not a funny situation, but a real life struggle. Mary and Joseph’s life reminds us of our lives and struggles. Mary could be a teenage girl who struggles with doubt, anxiety or an uncertain future. Joseph may be also one of us who struggles with the feelings of betrayal, anger and frustration. He feels too responsible and alone. What about the innkeeper in this story? He or she didn’t recognize Mary’s baby as the New Messiah, but kept things running at the inn. In short, the innkeeper was so physically close to God, but spiritually far away. Think about us: How many times do we miss the important things in our daily lives, for example, spiritual sense of God’s presence, our family, and friends.

The baby Jesus Christ was a special gift of God like a UPS delivery from God. In his gift, there was a note that said “I am Emmanuel. I will be with you always!” And there was a PS: “As I am a special blessing to you, you are here to be special gifts and blessings to others.” While I was working on my sermon, I was wrestling with a question, “How can we experience the birth of Christ?” The answer might be, simply let us accept God’s gift as ours and make ourselves available gifts for others as well. Be a blessing to others! Don’t forget that we are here as God’s special unwrapped gift boxes to one another. The baby Jesus reminds us of this truth. This is the Spirit of Christmas. Amen.