

## “The Christmas Gift”

Matthew 2:1-12, John 1:5

Christmas Day 2016

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Christmas greetings: The gift of love, the gift of hope, the gift of peace and the gift of joy. May all these be yours at Christmas! Through the season of Advent, we anticipated the birth of Christ. Finally Christmas has come to us today. How do we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus? Do we need a birthday cake? Yes, we do. It seems a little childish, but enjoy a piece of sweet Christmas in our fellowship time. Christmas has much more meaning and spiritual insights than a mere birthday party. This morning, I invite you to see the birth of Christ from a different perspective, ‘light in the darkness’.

The church liturgical year generally consists of six seasons: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, the time after Epiphany, Easter and time after Pentecost. The church year begins with season of Advent ending on Christmas Eve. Today we begin Christmas season and it will last for twelve days. Do you know the Christmas Carol, “The Twelve days of Christmas”? It refers to “the twelve days after Christmas”. The Christmas seasons end on January 5<sup>th</sup> the day before Epiphany (Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>).

The song, “The Twelve Days of Christmas” was written by Jesuits priests in the sixteenth century in England. In those times Roman Catholics in England were not permitted to practice their faith openly. So some priests wrote a carol to teach faith in code for the young Christians. The twelve days of Christmas was the nativity celebration from Christmas Day to Epiphany. For examples, the “My true love said to me” is God and “the partridge in the pear tree” is the **Christ Jesus reigning from the cross**. Two turtle doves were the Old and New Testaments. Three French hens stood for **Faith, Hope and Love**. The four calling birds were the **four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John**. The Five golden rings recalled the **Torah or law, the first books of the Old Testament**. The Six geese a-laying stood for the Six days of creation. Seven swans a-swimming represented the sevenfold gifts of the **Holy Spirit-prophecy, Serving, Teaching, Exhortation, Contribution, Leadership and Mercy**. The eight maids a-milking were the Eight beatitudes. Nine ladies dancing were **the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit-Live, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control**. The ten lords a-leaping were the **Ten commandments**. The eleven pipers piping stood for **the Eleven faithful disciples- Judas having left**. The twelve drummers drumming symbolized **the Twelve points of belief in the Apostles Creed**.

In Christian faith, Christmas is a special day. It is not only a day when the baby Jesus was born to us but it is also the day to remember God's incarnation, Emmanuel (God-is-with us). The Jesuit priests who wrote the Twelve Days of Christmas carol took a risk of being imprisoned or death if discovered. But they wanted to let people know the Emmanuel God.

Our Scripture reading in t Matthew tells us about wise men or Magi's deepest passion for their new Messiah. They were willing to take risk and traveled to find the baby Jesus far from the East to Bethlehem. They followed a big shining star for almost 1.000 miles. It wasn't an easy trip. Many people failed and gave up their trips. These wise men in our Scripture story persevered and completed their trip following a shining star. It is called 'Star of Bethlehem' or 'Christmas star'. In the end, this shining star would guide them to find the Messiah, the baby Jesus! Many Christians see the star as a miraculous sign to mark the birth of the Christ (or Messiah). Some theologians claimed that the star fulfilled a prophecy. The story of wise men is a reminder of the new Messiah who has come as light for everyone in the baby Jesus. The Spirit of Christmas reminds us that light has come as hope for those who sit in the darkness of their life challenges.

In Jewish mysticism tradition, God is often understood as the infinite light- the light filled all of existence before the creation. Our second Scripture reading reminds us that Jesus Christ is often compared to the light in the darkness. It says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Darkness is symbolized as evils, its power and influence, our sins, and the state of absence of God. When Jesus came to us, he brought light into our darkness. In this understanding, Jesus' death on a cross was a sign of how powerful darkness is in our lives. But the event of resurrection was a great example that God is much stronger than the power of darkness. Darkness cannot defeat even a tiny light. Jesus Christ is our hope and joy even in a despairing and hopeless situation.

Think about our own darkness. This darkness is more about uncertainty, anxiety and fear in your lives. Thomas Merton, Catholic priest and spiritual master expresses his honest confession to God. Listen to his prayer:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end....you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone."

Our life is like a thick fog which is ahead of us, but we have to go through anyhow. We might encounter unexpected challenges. We need guidance for our direction and light to shine our ways. Mary McCollum shared her wisdom with me in her words, “Whenever life seems like a fog, take just one small step and then the next step will become clear. Then take another. Keep moving.” The excitement of Christmas in our faith is not that we have the Messiah who will rescue us rather we accept the gift of a small light in the birth of the baby Jesus. So we can keep moving one step forward in faith. Maybe, the great gift of Christmas is not that almighty God will take away all our burdens rather we find joy in the birth of precious baby Jesus. We take courage from this gift of joy.

The true Christmas gift is to believe in Jesus that he will not only promise to be with us but also walk with us till the end of our lives journeys. When we receive him as our guide, His light will transform our fear into faith, weakness to strength, hope instead of despair and turn our sorrow into joy. Therefore let us rejoice, be glad and celebrate to have the birth of Jesus as our genuine light. May the Light of Christ shine in your hearts and make his light known and revealed to others through your light in Christ Jesus.

I conclude my Christmas message sharing a meaningful sentence that I found: “I asked for light, God gave me the sun. I asked for water, God gave me rain. I asked for happiness, God gave me you.” On this joyful and glorious day, think about your best Christmas gift give to you from God. Amen.