

GOD'S CHRISTMAS GIFT
Luke 2:1-21

Christmas Eve Service
December 24, 2014
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My friends, if I were to ask you what is the real meaning of Christmas what would you say? The real meaning of Christmas is that you and I matter to God; we really do. We matter to God so much that he sent his very own Son, Jesus, to earth to let us know how much we matter to him; that's the real message of Christmas.

There is a word, of course, that is one of the most used words in this season; that word is "gift." Most of us have been out frantically searching for gifts. We've been looking for the right gift at the right price. Yet where did all that come from? The tradition of gift giving began because God gave us a gift at the very first Christmas. God has a personal gift for each one of us; his gift is Jesus; his gift to us is a person.

Have you ever received a gift inside of a gift?...I have. One time when I was in college I received from my parents a pair of pants and a sweater in a gift box. When I tried them on, lo and behold there was some money in a pocket. It was a gift within a gift.

When we receive the gift of Jesus in our hearts and lives, there are also special gifts within Jesus and his love. Luke's Gospel says in Chapter 2, *"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.'"*

I believe it is very significant that the first thing that the angel said was, *"Don't be afraid."* Some of us here tonight might actually be afraid of God. Yet Jesus came to earth not to scare us, but to save us. Why did God come as a baby?...so no one would be afraid of him. No one is afraid of a baby. He came into the world the same way all of us came into the world—as a baby.

So what do we get when we receive this gift of Jesus in our hearts and being? We receive three things—God's gift of happiness; God's gift of hope; God's gift of harmony. These are gifts within the gift; these are the benefits of receiving God's big gift...his Son Jesus.

First we receive God's gift of happiness. The angel said, *"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."* The angel proclaims that God wants you and me to be happy. Our God is not some kill joy in the sky wanting to make our existence miserable.

You know there are lots of people, as well as the media, who believe that the Christian faith and boredom go together. It is true that sometimes churches have been guilty of being boring and stuffy; some may even get the misconception that God doesn't want us to smile. As my father used to say, *"If you don't think God has a sense of humor, just look at yourself in the mirror."*

Can you imagine one of my children coming to me and saying, *"Dad, I love you. I want to do what is right and be the kind of child you will be proud of."*...do you think I would then say, *"Well, you're going to regret you just said that for the rest of your life; I'm going to make it hard on you if you smile; I'm going to break all your stuff."* Of course I wouldn't do that.

Yet lots of people think that way about God. They think if we really come to God and say, *"God, I want to receive your Son, Jesus, into my life; I want to be what you want me to be."* They think that God is going to say, *"I've been waiting to make your life miserable."* Some actually think the word Christian means miserable.

Yet the truth is that God comes to us and says, *"I come to give you great news of great joy."* The first gift he wants us to have is that he wants us to be happy. Jesus said, *"I came that you might have life, and have it more abundantly."* We need to enjoy it. God wants to make the most out of each of us. Therefore we need to receive God's gift of happiness and joy.

Secondly we need to receive God's gift of hope. A famous saying states, *"If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was for forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior."*

What is salvation; what does it mean? It means three things—forgiveness for our past; freedom from our problems that mess us up in the present; and it means life everlasting in heaven. Forgiveness, freedom, and the promise of life everlasting; that's what salvation means.

Then what does it mean to be saved; what does it mean to have salvation? It means to be open and receive God's gifts of forgiveness, freedom and life everlasting. It means to receive these wonderful gifts of God's grace by faith and commitment.

Each of my three children along with my wife Kim are trained lifeguards. Something they learned in their training is that if a person is flailing about when they are drowning, a lifeguard can't do very much. In fact, to try and help a person when they are struggling so hard may actually pull both of them under and drown them.

A lifeguard, therefore, will often need to wait until the person runs out of energy so they won't fight. It is only when a person gives up, stops fighting and flailing, that saving them is possible. Then they can simply put their arm around their shoulder and swim to safety.

This truth also means that as long as we're trying to save ourselves. As long as we're thinking, *"I can work it all out; I can solve all my problems myself; I don't need God; I'm my own boss."* If we do this God says, *"You go right ahead; try to live all by yourself."*

Notice the frustration, the tension, the stress, the anger we often have. Notice the worry, the guilt, the bitterness, the depression. Where do these things come from? They come from trying to do God's job; by trying to handle life by ourselves.

God says relax; stop trying to save yourself. Stop trying to work your own way to heaven; stop trying to earn points with God. Relax and receive God's gift of hope in Jesus. John 3:17 says, *"God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,"*...but to save it. He didn't come to put us down, but to lift us up.

Third and finally, we need to receive God's gift of harmony. The angels sang, *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."* God wants each of us to have good and peaceful relationships with others, not just with him. He wants us to get our lives right with him, so we can get our lives right with others.

Christmas, my friends, is a time for reconciliation. It's a time to break down barriers, build bridges, restore relationships that have been broken and damaged. It's a time to say, *"I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"* It's a time to let go of old hurts and blaming.

Christmas for many people is a very tense time because it means dealing with some relatives we have unresolved issues with. Christmas is a time for reconciliation. First we need to receive God's peace in our hearts; then we need to share that peace with other people. 2 Corinthians 5:18 says that *"God reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."*

Yet some may be saying, *"But you don't know what they did to me; I could never forgive them."* That's why, my friends, we need Jesus. Human forgiveness and human love always run out. Why do you think there are so many broken relationships; human love runs out. That's why we need God's love; it never runs out.

I read one time about a person who got a Christmas gift 49 years ago before and still hadn't opened it; that's pretty dumb. Can you imagine someone asking, *"How did you like the gift?"* Yet the person responds, *"Oh, I loved it. I just haven't unwrapped or opened it."*

It is true that some of us may go Christmas after Christmas and never unwrap the real gift of Christmas. Perhaps some of you this evening have never received God's gift of Jesus by faith; therefore you have never received the true gift of real happiness, real hope, and real harmony.

Let us all this Christmas open our hearts to this unbelievable gift God has given us. Let us receive him into our hearts and lives by faith. It's real simple, my friends; all we need to do is ask him. Let us pray...