

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵ He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸ that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

John 1:1, 10-18

The gospel of John was the last of the gospels to be written, around 100 AD. It is a proclamation of faith, taking the historical roots of Christ, and extracting messages that would engage its first century hearers. The opening chapter, often called the prologue, sets the themes, images, and tone that will be carried on throughout the gospel. Here John begins with the eternal nature of God, which extends to earth and blesses all people.

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ...

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own,¹ and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Special Music "Angels We Have Heard on High" Trad., arr. Anne Britt

Sermon The Gift that Keeps on Giving

How was your Christmas? Did you receive all the gifts you hoped for? I received some very unexpected, deeply appreciated gifts. Thank you! As I thought about gifts this Christmas, I began to remember all those gifts I can never forget. The oddest gift I ever received was a pair of dry-clean only sox. (Really, what do you do with dry-clean sox?) And the best gift I ever received was an organ and years of music lessons.

But of all the gifts we might ever receive none can top the gift God gave and continues to give. Those are the best gifts, the ones that continue to give, like music lessons; they are there for you throughout

your life. It is not hard to recognize all the gifts God gives us. Life itself is a gift and yet often God's gifts can be left unacknowledged, unappreciated and unused, simply because we don't take notice.

That is exactly what both John and Paul have done in today's Scripture readings. They make us sit up and take notice. John immediately grabs our attention by bringing us back to God's very first gift; in fact, he even goes back beyond the beginning, into the being and nature of God. In the beginning the Word – the divine expression – was present, purposeful and active; bringing forth life, giving life to all Creation. That's some gift! And that alone is awesome beyond words.

But then God's self-expression, the Word, did more. God's Word, God's self-expression came to earth, became human, and set up his home with us. That too seems incomprehensible. Yet God did it for a very special reason – to give yet another stunning gift to us – “to all who believed him and embraced him, he gave the authority and power to become children of God”. Beyond being creatures made by God's word, beyond being a people formed as worshippers and servants of God, now God offered us the right, the authority and the power, the essential nature to be God's children, with all the majesty and glory that entails – as Paul once pointed to in Romans 8. It is a glory like that of the incarnate Son of God, who became like us so that we might become like him, in all his fullness.

That is the true gift that keeps on giving. When we believe, when we take hold of God's gift of Christ we receive his full salvation, the wholeness we were created for. And that is a gift, just as life itself is a gift. We do not earn it, work towards it, or deserve it. It is a gift, pure and simple. It is a gift that is rich, full, unending and untiring. It is the fullness of grace upon grace. Or as Paul summed up “in Christ God has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm.”

The question is – what are we to do with such an extravagant gift? Is it so precious that we lock it away in a sealed vault? Do we only take it out for Christmas and put it on display like a creche? Or are we meant to use it – not just occasionally, but every day? Yes, that is the intent of God's gift, to hold on to God's presence with meditation, to ponder God's wisdom with study, to enjoy God's goodness with thanksgiving, to rely on God's care and strength and power with prayer, to embody God's character with compassion and service.

I have named just a few possibilities for each of us to take up God's gift of grace, for our joy, for the world's renewal, and for God's glory. How will you receive God's gift? Amen.

***Hymn**

God's Love Made Visible!

CH 171 insert

Joys and Concerns

Prayers of the People

Glorious God, we are awed by your great love for us and your generous goodness toward us. We thank you for the gift of this wonderful creation and thank you for the astounding grace revealed in Jesus Christ. We thank you also for the power and presence of your Spirit who brings your gifts of grace to life in us. With deep gratitude and joy, we now turn to you, seeking your guidance that we may truly live as your children in this world

We pray for your church and for this congregation. May we recognize the wonder of your presence among us in Christ, and respond to your gift with open, receptive hearts. May the joy we know as your children overflow in our witness and service, that we may embody his grace filled life in all we do and say.

We pray for our world and all its leaders. Grant them an awareness of your majesty and mercy, and a recognition of your holy purpose to bless all people. Bless them and empower them as they seek to bring true peace and justice among the nations. We pray also for all who seek your mercy today. Grant your healing to the ill, your comfort to the mourning, and your provision to the needy. We especially thank you for... and we ask your continued care for...

We praise you , Wonderous God, for all your goodness to us through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Choral Response

Remember Me

Offering

We have received abundant blessings from our God. We have been empowered to live as children of God. As we share in his name, so we also share his compassion and purpose, that we may bring his great blessings to the world. Let us dedicate our gifts in faith.

Loving God, may these gifts bear testimony to the blessings we have received in Jesus Christ. May the grace granted to us be shared with others. Bless and multiply our giving, to your honor and glory, and the service of all humankind. Amen.

Doxology

(choose the one that is best for your faith)

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise him all creatures here below,
praise him above ye heavenly hosts, praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, Praise God all creatures here below
Praise God for all that Love has done; Creator, Christ and Spirit One. Amen

Communion

Hymn

I Come with Joy

NCH 349 vs 1,4

Invitation

Great Thanksgiving

Consecration and Service

Prayer of Gratitude

Lord Jesus, we have received your word and tasted your grace. Now may your Spirit strengthen and guide us as we seek to live as your disciples and servants in the world. Amen.

***Hymn**

Go Tell It on the Mountain

NCH 154 vs 1,3

***Common Commission**

Let us go forth into the world in peace, being of good courage, holding fast to that which is good, rendering to no one evil for evil, strengthening the faint-hearted, supporting the weak, helping the afflicted, honoring all persons, loving and serving the Lord, and rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.

*** Benediction**

Go now into the world

giving thanks to God who has enabled you to take part in what he has promised his people in the kingdom of his dear son. Colossians 1:12

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. Amen

Postlude

“Auld Lang Syne.”

Trad., arr. D.W.

music provided by Chris Harris and Lynne Walker