

“The Gift”
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
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Luke 2:1-20

Tired, frazzled, grumpy. That probably captures the overall mood. Crowded streets, long lines, packing, travelling, cooking, cleaning. Now none of us have experienced anything like this recently, but just try to imagine it, if you can, and you’ll get some idea of what it was like 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. The place was swollen to the bursting point. The people who lived there likely felt annoyed by this influx of strangers, except for the innkeepers, who appear to have done a brisk trade.

Add on to all of those nuisances the fact that people had no choice. This wasn’t some big family reunion or an exciting, joyous religious festival. This miserable mass migration back to your ancestral home was orchestrated by Emperor Augustus to take a census whose sole purpose was to tax his subjects more efficiently. The situation was even worse for Mary and Joseph. Nine-months’ pregnant bouncing around on a donkey for 90 miles, and then they finally arrive only to see over every inn neon signs flashing “No Vacancy.”

Everybody just wanted to get this over with, so they could go back to their normal, everyday lives. They wanted peace. Little did they suspect that, in the midst of all this chaos, real peace had entered their town, and would emerge into the world.

In fact, apart from Mary and Joseph, a handful of shepherds, and whoever the shepherds told about what they’d experienced, nobody in Bethlehem had a clue, and they wouldn’t for quite some time, and even then, thirty years in the future, when Jesus claimed that he fulfilled Isaiah’s prophecy that a “Prince of Peace” would come, most people didn’t believe him. Actually, most people were too busy to pay him much attention.

Yet peace did arrive, embodied in a baby, born in a noisy, reeking animal pen. It's hard to think of a humbler way for Jesus to enter the world, and maybe that happened on purpose, as a way of symbolizing why God came to be with us. He came, not despite our mess, but because of it: to bring hope that order could overcome chaos, that those dislocated from home might one day return, that the slavery of sin might be broken and freedom restored, so that we might be reconciled with God and with others in peace.

The Incarnation, God made flesh, was, is now, and ever shall be the greatest of all gifts. Without that first bawling breath, there could be no final breath on the cross, and God in Jesus offered both of them freely, without precondition, motivated by a love we can barely begin to grasp, a dazzling love that inspires in the faithful a childlike sense of awe and wonder that something so amazing could possibly take place.

You probably remember a special Christmas as a child when you received a gift that brought you great joy, a gift you'd waited for, dreamed of, for so long. It might have been a dollhouse or a train set or a drum set. And those drums are a truly sacrificial gift for a parent to bestow: the hearing loss, the gradual erosion of sanity.

However, your fondest memories probably come not from what you have received but from what you have given. When someone you love opens the toy or the book or that drum set, and the look on their face. That's a joyful experience, and it's not selfish to feel that way. God created us to be generous givers, because that's who God is, and God wants us to be like Him.

God also created us to be grateful recipients of gifts, tough as that can be, because receiving makes us humble. That's why we can feel awkward about getting gifts. We feel uncomfortable because it reveals a truth we'd rather keep concealed, namely our dependence on

God and our interdependence with others. It challenges the prevalent myth that we don't need anybody else, that we can manage on our own, when that simply isn't the case.

But most important, when it comes to God's gift of grace in Jesus, we cannot give until we receive, and to truly receive, one must take action. If you're given a game and never play it, the gift hasn't really been received. It's been rejected, the gift nullified. A gift without a willing receiver, someone prepared to use the gift, isn't a gift. It's just a thing.

The shepherds in the fields received an astonishing gift, an angelic chorus singing a message about how the world would never be the same again. If the shepherds had stayed there, instead of going into Bethlehem to seek out the child, they could not have given Mary and Joseph the message, and like a toy never touched, the angels' gift would have been unreceived.

To receive the gift of Jesus, we need to take action. We need to use the gift, allow it to shape our lives, to change how we think, to alter our priorities, and to use this particular gift, we need to give it to others. We haven't really received the gift of Jesus until we give it to someone else, and unlike mere things, which cease to be present in our lives when we give them away, when we give Jesus to others, the original gift does not leave us, but comes into our hearts with even greater abundance than before.

Yet we feel understandably reluctant to give Jesus. Many people aren't interested. Some might be offended or even hostile if you tried, and it's hard to know how to do it. How exactly do we share Jesus with others? Well, it's not what you might think. You don't have to beat somebody over the head with a Bible, spouting scripture chapter and verse. Most of us have been on the receiving end of that, and it's generally not helpful.

Instead, remember Bethlehem, how God came to be with us, humbly, to bring peace. Jesus gave mercy to people viewed with suspicion, those cast out from society, often because

they needed healing, and he did not judge or condemn them. He broke down barriers that kept people apart. He gave food to the hungry, hope to those in despair.

Jesus spoke wisely and gently, except when he dealt with people who thought they were superior to everyone else, who thought they and they alone had all the answers, and when he got angry with them, I think he meant to wake them up to reality and bring them to repentance and renewal of life. We need to resist the arrogant and the proud, without being arrogant or proud, and if we dwell in Jesus and allow him to work through us, that's possible. That gift, though almost certain to be rejected by those with whom we try to share it, will be most welcome to people who suffer from the self-proclaimed mighty and to everyone who desires God's peace to reign.

These are just a few examples. Through prayer, you'll find many more. With the support of a fellowship of faith, we can all learn more about how to receive and give Jesus, and if we choose to do this with energy, the light of Christ will shine in a world where the shadows are deepening, bringing peace in the midst of conflict, and increasingly the true joy that comes from one source, Jesus our Lord. Amen.