

“The Joy of Christmas Presents”

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## Opening Prayer

Good Morning Beloved, we are almost there! Christmas is almost upon us. One of the most joyful times of the year for us, even in 2020, is this season. You may have already begun, but if you haven't yet you can expect all of the various Christmas things to begin to take place. We will be meeting, in person or virtually, with friends and family. We will be partaking in a bunch of traditions no doubt, and the ones that we can have this year will be especially important for us. We will be meeting outside for the Christmas Eve or the Christmas Day service. In a year of trial, we still have this joy! One of the other things that I am sure most of us will be doing is exchanging gifts, and Beloved there is joy for us in this isn't there?

Normally when you hear a minister talk about Christmas presents, it is in a negative light, and for good reason. No respectable minister wants the focus of this time of year on anything other than Jesus. Having the joy and the excitement of Advent be about gift giving is a temptation for most all of us I imagine, wondering what we are getting from our spouse or our friends or our kids or from our parents. No minister wants to encourage greed... but there is a really wonderful and beautiful aspect to gift giving, something that is Holy in receiving a present. Even if the gift itself isn't all that important, the act of giving or receiving gifts is, and in that regard there is most definitely a Godly connection. After all, what is your favorite gift and why?

My favorite gift, really without question, was this rifle I received from my father on Christmas Day in 2013. This is a Mosin-Nagant M44. It is a rather cheap, mass produced, obsolete military rifle that would have been made right around the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. It is completely impractical for most things, it is heavy, it is crudely made... and I love it. I don't love it because it is useful, although I have used this for hunting. I don't love it because it is pretty, because it certainly isn't. I love it because it came from my father, and it exemplifies a lot of the things that the two of us have in common. We love deer hunting, we love outdoorsy things, we love that camaraderie that comes from doing that stuff together. It isn't the gift itself that makes this my favorite gift ever, it is all the bonding between my father and myself that makes this gift the best. It isn't the gift that you get, it is what it represents. Connecting this to scripture actually isn't hard, as we see the gifts given to Jesus shortly (respectively I suppose) after His birth are very appropriate and representative about who He is.

We opened up our scripture reading today with Exodus 30:1-6 and 22-37. In this section of scripture the Lord gives Moses and the people instructions for the oil and incense used within the tabernacle. The tabernacle, which literally means “dwelling,” was the place where the Lord was worshipped before the temple was built in the Old Testament. The Lord's presence was there, and so appropriately it was an extremely holy place. You may have noticed already, but the gifts

that were given to Jesus of gold, myrrh, and frankincense all have their place in the tabernacle and featured there prominently.

Verse 3 read “You shall overlay it [the altar] with pure gold, its top and its sides all around, and its horns; and you shall make a gold molding all around for it.” The whole of the altar was covered in gold, an appropriate metal for a king. Verse 23 read “Take also for yourself the finest of spices: of flowing myrrh five hundred shekels, and of fragrant cinnamon half as much, two hundred and fifty, and of fragrant cane two hundred and fifty.” Myrrh, a fragrant tree resin, has been used for millennia to make all sorts of fragrant things. It was the main ingredient in the anointing oil used to consecrate the priests for the temple, and it marks holiness. Myrrh is the mark of a priest. Verses 34-35 read “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Take for yourself spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, spices with pure frankincense; there shall be an equal part of each. With it you shall make incense, a perfume, the work of a perfumer, salted, pure, and holy.’” Frankincense too is a type of fragrant tree resin, and it was a main ingredient in the incense used in the tabernacle to mark God’s presence. No where else was this specific combination of spices to be burned. Frankincense therefore was the mark of the Lord. If you put together the three different gifts that Jesus received and their connection to the tabernacle (God’s dwelling amongst men), you can get a glimpse into why the wise men gave these specific gifts.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were given to Christ in Matthew 2:11. It is such a short little piece there, where these gifts are given. Really we only have twelve whole verses about the Wise Men, the Magi, at all. There are many speculations and theories (pretty good ones by the way) about who these guys were and where they came from, but at the end of the day there is only so much that you can get out of twelve short verses. There is only so much that we can learn from one little verse, within a little story, from a short moment in Jesus’s life... but just because it is little doesn’t mean it isn’t profound. Gold is the gift of a king, and clearly the Wise Men regarded Jesus as king. They even called Him “King of the Jews” in verse two to the guy who thought he was king, Herod. Myrrh is the gift of a priest, a holy anointing. Frankincense was the gift for God. It marked the place of the Lord. If you put these three together you can see that the gifts represented who Jesus was, King, Holy Priest, and God. The special part for us, the thing that matters when it comes to giving or receiving gifts is that it isn’t about the actual gift, but the point behind it, and that is what I hope you remember as we look at this scripture.

When the Magi gave Jesus the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, it wasn’t the gifts themselves that were important. Jesus didn’t need those gifts... He was God in human flesh! What can you physically give the Lord who made everything that He needs? The answer is nothing. But that isn’t what giving gifts is about right? My favorite gift, that old beat up rifle, isn’t my favorite gift because I needed a new deer gun. It is my favorite because it came from my Dad and it represents all kinds of bonding between us. These gifts given to Jesus are remembered by us because they made Jesus into a King, a Priest, and the Lord... they are remembered because they represented who He already was.

Beloved, Christmas is going to be here this Friday. Even in 2020 I have no doubt that most of us are going to see some family (again virtually or in person), and that we will still be opening gifts and making special treats, etc. The piece I want you to leave with this morning, the practical lesson we can apply from our scripture readings, is that the blessings of gift-giving and traditions and good food actually are not found within those things, but rather what they represent. You should enjoy these things on Christmas. Blessings given by the Lord are not sinful unless we make them our sole aim, but don't forget that it isn't the pies or the gifts or the tree that make Christmas Day wonderful. It is all the bonding, all of the joy, all of the peace that they represent. Oh, and don't forget the most wonderful gift given to you on Christmas Day either... a little baby boy born in a manger who would grow to take away the sins of the world. Let us pray.

### **Closing Prayer**