

## "The Gift of Christ"

Date: December 24, 2018

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Occasion: Christmas Eve

Theme: Faith, Hope, Love

Throughout Advent we have celebrated the Christmas gifts that won't break, represented by the outer candles of the Advent wreath: hope, love, joy, and peace. Now, we celebrate the greatest gift of all, represented by the center candle: the gift of Jesus Christ. Jesus really is what it's all about, what Christmas truly means.

So let's dig in – let's celebrate the Best Christmas gift of all, the gift of Christ. And, of course, the best place to find Christ is in Bethlehem. So, let's go with the shepherds to Bethlehem to see this thing of which the angels sing. Max Lucado in his book *The Applause of Heaven* puts it like this:

"A small cathedral outside Bethlehem marks the supposed birthplace of Jesus. Behind the high altar in the church is a cave, a little cavern lit by silver lamps. You can enter the main edifice and admire the ancient church. You can also enter the quiet cave where a star embedded in the floor recognizes the birth of Jesus. There is one stipulation though. You have to stoop. The door is so low you can't go in standing up.

"The same is true of Christ. You can see the world standing tall, but to witness the Savior, you have to get on your knees.

"So... while the theologians were sleeping and the elite were dreaming and the successful were snoring, the meek were kneeling. They were kneeling before the One only the meek will see. They were kneeling in front of Jesus."

So, now in the spirit of humility and in the spirit of expectancy, let us go over to Bethlehem and honor the newborn king. Let us go see and celebrate the gift of Christ. And let me suggest three things we can expect the gift of Christ will bring to us.

**First, the gift of Christ offers us faith.** James Moore, in his book *Christmas Gifts That Won't Break* tells this story. He remembers a time when he was on a tour with a group to the Holy Land. He says, "I will never forget that morning when we came to the church at Bethlehem. It was such a thrill for me to come to that sacred place where Jesus Christ was born.

An old man, who was a native of Bethlehem, was standing there in front of the church that marks the spot of Christ's birth. As we walked toward the church, he watched us. Suddenly, he wave to me to get my attention and said, "Are you an American?" "Yes," I answered.

"Are you a Christian?" he asked. "Yes!" I said. He then reached over and took my hand in his. He smiled warmly and said, "Welcome home! Welcome home!" (Page 110-111)

He was right, you know. He was right. Bethlehem is the birthplace, the home of our faith. It was there that we first received the Christ Child. It was there that the drama of redemption took a dramatic turn. It was there that God came to visit and redeem God's people. The gift of Jesus Christ is the very foundation of our faith.

One of the more dramatic moments of the 1992 Olympic Games at Barcelona provides us with a modern parable. This particular moment happened during the semifinals of the men's 440-meter race. Great Britain's Derek Redmond went down on the backstretch with a torn hamstring. Despite the excruciating pain, the injured runner struggled to his feet, and he started to hop on one leg in an effort to finish the race.

When he reached the final stretch a large man in a tee shirt came down out of the stands and ran to Derek Redmond and hugged him. It was his father. "You don't have to do this," he told his weeping son.

“Yes, I do,” whispered Derek through his pain. “Well then,” said the father, “we’re going to do this together. So they did. Waving away the security guards and the medical helpers, the son’s head sometimes buried in his father’s shoulder, the two men stayed in Derek’s lane and crossed the finished line. The crowd watched, then rose, then cheered and wept.

It’s a great parable for Christmas, is it not? Realizing that we can’t make it, that we are down and out, that we need help, God sends us a Savior. In Jesus Christ, God comes into our world, into our arena, to pick us up, to hold us up, to see us through, and to bring us home. This is the faith of Christmas, that God so loved the world that he sent his son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

Christ brings us the gift of faith. **Second, the gift of Christ offers us hope.** Several years ago, a small town called Hope, Alaska, was destroyed by a flood. No lives were lost, but there was tremendous property damage. A bishop went there to see how he might help. When he arrived, he found the devastated town completely deserted.

However, someone had placed a small sign in the center of what had once been the main street of the little town. The sign said: “The Community Hope has moved to higher ground.”

This is what the miracle of Christmas, the gift of Christ, does for us. It moves our hope to higher ground. It reminds us of the power and love of God. It reminds us that God is indeed the King of kings; the Prince of Peace, the Lord of Heaven and Earth – and that God cannot be defeated.

Even though evil will sometimes make a lot of noise in our world, as Christians we can be confident. We can be filled with hope because we know that ultimately God and righteousness will win. And just think of it, God wants to share the victory with us. That’s why Christ came into the

World – to bring the good news of God’s ultimate victory. That is our hope.

Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer, expresses it powerfully like this: “Hark! The herald angels sing, ‘Glory to the newborn King; peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.’”

Our hope is one that will see God and sinners reconciled, with peace on earth, and all people praising God’s glory. At Bethlehem, in Christ we find faith and hope.

**Third, the gift of Christ offers us of love.** “Love came down at Christmas.” That’s the way we sing it, and rightfully so. Most of all Christmas is about love. The gift of Christ is the very gift of love itself coming to be with us. Another story:

In his book *Solid Living in a Shattered World*, Bill Hinson told about a Christmas several years ago when his daughter, Cathy, received a perky little white puppy for Christmas. Cathy named him “Happy” because his tail wagged constantly. She said, “He has a happy ending.”

It became Dad’s job to build a doghouse for Happy, but when it was finished, Happy wanted nothing to do with it. It was too dark, too big, too foreboding. Happy would not go near it. The family tried putting him inside but he quickly ran out. They tried everything: warnings, pleadings, commands, threats, and bribes. But to no avail. Happy would not go inside.

Finally, Bill gave up and went inside to get a drink of water. As he stood at the kitchen sink looking out the window, he couldn’t believe his eyes. He saw Happy, with tail wagging joyously, trot right into the doghouse and lie down quietly. Bill was amazed. What had happened?!

You know what he found? His daughter, little Cathy, had crawled into the doghouse and was resting inside. When Happy saw Cathy go inside, he trotted right in there beside her and made it his home!

The point is clear: where all those other things had failed, love prevailed. That's what Christmas teaches us. Love is the single most powerful thing in the world. And in the gift of Christ, we receive the gift of love in the most powerful and perfect way.

The shepherds left their fields and made their way to the manger, to bow down and worship. When the three wise men arrived later, they brought three gifts to honor the newborn King. When we go to Bethlehem we receive three gifts, I'm sure of it.

The miracle of Christmas faith!

The miracle of Christmas hope!

And the miracle of Christmas love!

And most of all, we receive one true gift that makes faith, hope and love possible: the gift of Jesus Christ, the gift of a Savior. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Christmas Gifts That Won't Break* by James W. Moore and Jacob Armstrong, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017, pp. 108-115.