

“The Gift of Hope”

Date: December 2, 2018
Occasion: Advent One
Texts: Matthew 1:18-21

Place: Lakewood UMC
Theme: Hope

Bishop Kenneth Shamblin tells the story about his five year old son, Ken, Jr. More than anything that five year old wanted a red toy truck for Christmas. That’s all he could think about, and all he could talk about for weeks. Finally, Christmas arrives and under the tree was that beautiful red toy truck that he had wanted so badly.

He played with it all morning long. Oh, he got other toys, but it was his toy truck that kept his attention for hours. But then, shortly after their Christmas dinner, Bishop Shamblin sat down to read the newspaper and he heard his son crying.

Ken Jr. was standing in front of him with the toy truck in his left hand and the wheels in his right hand. Through his tears he whimpered, “Daddy, my Christmas is broken already!” I’m happy to report that the wheels were quickly put back onto the truck and there was a happy ending.

But that incident raises an interesting question: “What are the Christmas gifts that won’t break?” Any one of us whose life depends on material things will surely be disappointed, because material things do not last. They go out of style; they wear out; they break.

So during this Advent season, I want us to think about Christmas gifts that won’t break. There are many, of course, but in these four weeks we will focus on the four gifts represented by the four outer candles of the traditional Advent wreath: hope, love, joy and peace. Let’s begin with hope.

Shea Glover, a high school student at the Chicago High School for the Arts, posted a video from a school project on YouTube in 2015. It now

has millions of views. In the video, Shea stands behind the camera and prepares to take a video of her classmates, one at a time. Then, as she begins to film, she explains the premise of her project. The premise, she says, is to film things she finds beautiful.

What happened next was not Shea's intent, but it quickly became the focus of the project and the reason it went viral. Shea's initial hope was simply to record beautiful people in her school. What the video became is a look at the stark difference between people's faces before and after they are told they are beautiful.

The reactions range from being embarrassed to being flattered. Some laugh or look away. One student angrily protests, thinking it a mean joke. Most, though, simply smile, showing an incredible before-and-after transformation.

Being called *beautiful* changes the way we look. Being called *beautiful* gives a gift we don't see coming. Words have power. No one disagrees that what we do is important. We've all heard the phrase, "Actions speak louder than words," and in most cases that is true.

But what we see in the Advent Scriptures, though, is that what we say is really important, too. We hold the power to give a gift by what we say to people, about people, and about ourselves.

Joseph is one of the great characters in the story of Jesus' birth. Most people have heard of him. Mary gets a little more press, ok, a lot more press, but Joseph hangs right in there. We know Joseph is noble. We know that Joseph is a person of action, and with few exceptions, the *right* action.

What is striking, though, is that Joseph is a man of very few words. It is commonly observed that we don't know anything that Joseph said. Of course, nobody thinks that Joseph couldn't talk; it's just that there is no

record of any of his words. But that's not quite true. Joseph said something. And we know what it is. Are you on the edge of your seat? One word. There is one recorded word from Joseph: *Jesus*.

After learning that his fiancée is pregnant, Joseph is told in a dream not to be afraid. An angel tells him to believe what Mary says is true. And Joseph is told to name the boy *Jesus*. The name means "Savior."

But notice this, the name *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Joshua*. You remember who Joshua was. He's the Old Testament guy who walked around the walls of Jericho and the walls came a tumblin' down. And so, the name Joshua can also mean "wall-breaker."

Jesus – Savior, Wall-Breaker. Here is the good news of Christmas: Jesus Christ is our Savior, our Redeemer, and our Reconciler. He lived up to his name. He makes us all one. He breaks down the dividing walls and shows us that we are God's family. And that there is hope for peace on earth and good will toward all people. Jesus gives the gift of hope.

Joseph may not have said a lot, but what he did say was extremely important, giving the baby boy his name, "Jesus." I'm sure Joseph said a lot of things, even though they weren't recorded. I'm sure he and Mary did a lot of talking about that whole Holy Spirit conception thing.

I'm sure they shared some special words as they wrapped their baby in swaddling clothes. I'm sure they prayed fear-filled prayers as they escaped to Egypt in the night. We may not have a record of all the words Joseph spoke. But we know for sure that he said this: "Jesus." It was Joseph who gave the name to the Son of God.

Now, why is that important? Because what we call people can make all the difference. "You are beautiful," Shea Glover said. When I was a kid I was called four-eyes for wearing glasses and metal-mouth for wearing

braces. I was named after my father, though, Robert Lewis, and felt it was my duty to live up to the name I had been given. I sluffed off those other names.

What we call people could be the most important gift we can give. Old man-of-a-few-words Joseph, when his son was born, basically said, “His name is Jesus,” and it may have been the most significant name-calling in human history.

You and I, we are called to speak that name into our world, the name *Jesus*. God saves! God delivers! God will rescue us! God will do whatever it takes to break down walls. Christians believe a crazy thing. We believe there is power in the name of Jesus. The mere name brings hope to the world.

Jesus’ name brings the gift of hope for healing. James said that the elders of the church should pray for healing in the name of the Lord Jesus (James 5:14). We do it all the time. We believe that in the name of Jesus’ powerful name is found the gift of hope for healing.

Jesus’ name brings the gift of hope for refuge. We believe that in times when we are afraid, we are at war, and times when we find ourselves as refugees in foreign lands that there is hope in Jesus. When the world is falling apart around us, we can take refuge in the Lord Jesus.

Jesus’ name brings the gift of hope for deliverance. His disciples cast out demons in his name. Alcoholics, drug addicts and addicts of every stripe find hope in the name of Jesus, for he sets us free from the things that bind us. There are some things that only Jesus’ name can cast out.

Jesus’ name brings the gift of hope for salvation. Acts 4:12 tells us, everyone who calls on the name of Jesus will be saved. We are saved by calling on the name of Jesus, and the first guy to say that was Joseph.

He may not have said much, but what he said was important. He gave Jesus his name, Savior, Wall-Breaker, Deliverer.

My friends, as we receive the gift of hope in our new life in Christ, we have the wonderful opportunity to speak it to others. Just as the students at the Chicago High School of the Arts were transformed when a classmate called them beautiful, we too can speak a word of hope into the world.

So today, tell some people who think they are ugly that they are beautiful. You are telling the truth. They were made in the image of God, and ‘God don’t make no junk.’ Watch them change.

Tell someone who is bitter that she is blessed. You aren’t lying. Every person is a child of God and therefore a blessed person of worth.

Tell someone who thinks he is forgotten that he is indeed remembered by you.

Tell someone who is tired and doesn’t have enough that God’s strength is available to her. Isaiah 40 tells us to wait upon the Lord and we shall renew our strength, mounting up with the wings of an eagle.

God is sending you in Jesus’ name to speak a word of hope into the world.

The only thing we know Joseph to have said is “Jesus.” When the baby was born he looked at him, the Son of God in flesh, and said, “Jesus.” It is the name by which one day every knee will bow. It is the name that sends the demons scurrying away to dark places.

Thank God for Joseph, who said the name “Jesus” and brought the gift of hope to the world. 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. 7-32.