

Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

An old pocketknife . . . When Pastor James Howell was preparing to leave the congregation he'd served for 12 years, one of the oldest members of the church gave him a farewell gift. That 89-year-old church member was one of the most influential leaders of the congregation, but not in a bossy, superior kind of way. He was a simple man who preferred overalls to suits, still drove a tractor on the land he farmed, rarely missed worship, regularly visited the homebound, and offered wisdom and solid strength when decision-making in the congregation was paramount. And he gave Pastor Howell a farewell gift of his very own pocketknife.

The pastor certainly didn't see **that** gift coming. The parishioner, before giving it to him, said, "I couldn't decide what to give you, now that you're leaving. I bought a nice leather Bible for your family." But Howell sensed that wasn't all. Then the man's calloused hand pulled that knife out of the depths of his denim pocket. Howell said it was worn from decades of going everywhere and anywhere, had probably cut rope, whittled sticks, sliced apples. And now it was being given to him.

Reflecting on that gift, Pastor Howell recognized that, had someone told him, "List 500 things you hope to own someday," an old, used pocketknife would never have made the list. Yet, there it was, being pressed into his palm. Makes me think of the pocketknife I routinely find in the cushions of our couch. It's the pocketknife that originally belonged to my husband's grandfather. Randy tells me that his grandpa used that knife for all kinds of things, and that my mother-in-law was plainly horrified when grandpa used the knife (who knows where it had been last?) to cut off kernels from the cob so Randy (then a small boy missing his front teeth) could eat fresh corn at the dinner table. I suspect the pocketknife means something very special to my husband. But he probably never thought to ask for it as a gift.

I agree with Pastor Howell. In our consumer mentality, we are consumed with giving gifts that people **want**. We have our kids give us detailed lists. We ask friends

what they'd like before we even darken the doors of the stores. That's not necessarily a bad thing. I, for one, gladly give gift cards and glad receive them, so I and other folks can buy the things we want. But on this night, we celebrate the gift that we would **never** have thought to ask for. Or, as Howell put it, the gift "*we'd forgotten how to want.*"

Too often, we humans make God into some kind of therapeutic-Santa Claus-model of a God—the One who gives us what we want. That's what drives a lot of religiosity these days—how to get God to give us what we think we ought to have, be it prosperity, success, romantic love, or neat and orderly lives. Why, some of our **prayers** can sound like detailed shopping lists of things we crave.

Remember Isaiah's prophecy that we heard this evening? It probably seemed like the answer to **Israel's** prayers. How many, many years had gone by, and how many generations of Jewish people had been born and died with the same desire in their hearts—that the Lord God would raise up a righteous king for them! Isaiah gives voice to their hopes and dreams as he proclaims that their longed-for king will come, and he will be wonderful and mighty. He will establish an everlasting reign of peace such as they had never seen, what with the empires that lorded it over them. That's what they wanted from God; that's the gift they craved—someone who would go head-to-head with the nations that always oppressed them.

Our Gospel passage this evening reiterates that same desire of the people by reminding us of the world situation when Jesus was born. It was a world dominated by Caesar Augustus and his powerful military machine. It was a world ruled by the Roman empire. And the propaganda, the myth perpetuated, was that the emperor was a god, and so it was that for Augustus the following titles were normally reserved: "Savior" and "Lord." Such divine names signified his power. He wielded that power as he moved the people of his empire about by his decree. Here and there, hither and yon they were moved by Augustus and his army—in order to suppress dissent and keep track of them, in order to count them and exact taxes from them.

But of course, his dictatorial decree that people travel to their home towns for an empire-wide census was used by **God** for a greater purpose. For the census brought Joseph and a very pregnant Mary to the little town of Bethlehem. Who's really in charge here? It's not Caesar Augustus!

Why, Luke in his Gospel doesn't even apply those titles of "Savior" and "Lord" to Caesar Augustus. Luke reserves those titles for the baby Jesus, born in a cattle stall. Now, I know it seems that this child, born of a peasant family, born without status or wealth, doesn't **look** like the fulfillment of prophecy, or the answer to prayer. I guess we could say God didn't give the people exactly what they desired, what they **wanted** to have. But Pastor Howell suggests this—that God gave his people what **God** wanted them to have. Himself. He wanted to give us Himself. And so he gave us his Son Jesus. And, surprise! This gift was not someone who goes head-to-head with the empires surrounding us that we blame for all the wrongs in the world, but rather, someone who goes head-to-head with the sinful empires that lie **inside** each of us. Someone who takes his love, and goes head-to-head with the hate we carry that threatens to consume us all. God gave us his Son, so that, at last, after going head-to-head with all that is contrary to him, what will remain is that perfect love, lived out in his sons and daughters.

Pastor Howell related that, when that church member gave him the old, used pocketknife, he said these words: "Pastor, carry that around with you in your pocket. Then some day, when you're having a bad day, feel it down in there and remember that somebody loves you." And so it was that the gift of the old, undesirable pocketknife became precious and invaluable.

Is this the gift we've forgotten how to want? The gift of forgiveness and grace, pruning and refining, love that has the power to change us? **That's** the gift God gives us again this night. And so we celebrate at the gift unwrapped before us, and give thanks that God has given his people what **He** wanted us to have. **AMEN.**

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