

## *Unwrapping the Gift*

Christmas Eve  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

December 24, 2007  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Luke 2:1-20

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

Families have all kinds of traditions regarding gift-giving at Christmas. I was raised in a family where, on Christmas morning, as we gathered together around the tree, we'd pass the presents out, and after all the gaily wrapped gifts were at their appointed recipient, one of us would say something like this: "Thank you—I'd love to go first. Let's see, which one should I open? Oh, maybe this one. The tag says it's from Grandma, but I have no idea what it is. Hmm (shaking the contents) . . . what could it be? Well, I guess I'll open it and find out! Should I save the bow? And it's a shame to tear this pretty paper. (*The gift is carefully opened.*) Oh, Grandma—it's lovely! Thank you!"

Slowly, laboriously, we would open our gifts, one gift at a time, one person at a time, going around the room. It took forever. But I must admit there was plenty of time to anticipate and savor and enjoy the entire ambience surrounding the gifts and the givers.

I **married** into a family where, on Christmas morning, as we gather together around the tree, we pass the presents out, and after all the gaily wrapped gifts are at their appointed recipient, we open them like this: (*Rip! Tear! Pull! Shred! Wrapping paper here, ribbons and bows there!*)

All at the same time. Takes about 5 minutes, 10 minutes max. But it's exciting! There's lots of noise and *oohs* and *ahhs* filling the room. It's a whirlwind of ribbons and bows, of shrieks of delight and heart-felt thank-you's emanating from every corner.

I used to prefer the one way—the way I was raised. In fact, I never did convince the family I married into to unwrap gifts my way. I do, however, tend to split the difference. I let the ripping, tearing and chaotic unwrapping in joyful abandon with choruses of "Thank you!" go on around me—I just sit there and take it all in—and then, when everyone is done, I slowly open my presents. I find it doubly enjoyable that way. For I now realize that, either way, in time the gift is revealed and we receive it and we respond to it.

Just as it is with worshipers here tonight. Some of us here were raised in the Christian faith, hearing the story of Jesus born in Bethlehem from our earliest years, when we were still in our parents' arms. As we've grown, we've witnessed and experienced Jesus Christ and his power in our lives over and over. And some of us have been together a long time. This is my 9<sup>th</sup> Christmas Eve leading worship here at Trinity—and our 8<sup>th</sup> Contemporary Christmas Eve service. We're a church family gathered around this wonderful story about God's incarnation in Jesus. I guess you would say the gift of a savior come to us has long since been unwrapped by many of us here. What a joy to gather with you . . . again.

But there are also others here tonight for whom the gift of Jesus Christ still rests, in a sense, wrapped and waiting before them. It is equally a joy to gather this night with **you**. I'm not sure why the gift is still wrapped. I suppose there are a variety of reasons. Maybe you only recently heard the story of Jesus Christ. Maybe your parents didn't raise you in the Christian faith. Or maybe they did teach you about Jesus, took you to church, gave you a Bible, the whole nine yards, but you ended up, for some reason or another, walking away from that good news and not living in it. Maybe you are a lot like Mary here this evening, pondering, thinking, feeling thoughtful and reflective, working in mind and heart to understand what faith is, what trust is, what God's truth is. Maybe (and this "maybe" is addressed to each of us here, old and new alike), maybe something—something really challenging, difficult, painful—happened along the way, and God's gift of salvation just doesn't appear to be much of a gift at all.

So, what is it about this gift that makes it gift? Well, let me tell you a story. It was Christmas 1958, and my parents couldn't afford anything but a few small presents under the tree. I was a one-year-old, my brother was 2 ½, Mom was home in our apartment caring for us, and my Dad's dental practice was in its initial stages where word-of-mouth was the tedious-but-only-way to build up a roster of patients. Thus their Christmas budget didn't allow for any luxuries. No splurging on items of extravagance, since the money wasn't there in the first place.

Still, Mom wanted to get Dad something special. So, she borrowed \$19 from her mother, my Grandma Burglund. Grandma's egg money, it was—quarters earned from selling eggs in town from their farm, quarters that had been stuffed into Grandma's leather pouch. Grandma lent my Mom \$19 in egg money, and Mom went to a department store in Pittsburgh and bought a transistor radio.

In this age of Sirius satellite radio, MP3 players, and digital everything, a transistor radio with the ability to broadcast only AM radio stations may seem hopelessly antiquated, but in 1958, the technology that made possible a portable AM radio was amazing. A transistor radio was **the thing** to get for Christmas in 1958. And the last thing my Dad ever thought he'd receive. He loved that gift—it was total surprise, extravagance beyond measure, and it gave my mother such pleasure to watch him move that radio dial, tune in to KDKA radio and walk to work, listening to the morning broadcast. And you know what else? My Dad was profoundly aware, every time he used that radio, that it had been pure gift to him. He had not given in kind to my Mom that year, the budget being what it was. She had given to him without thought of receiving in like manner.

So, what makes this gift of Jesus Christ a gift? As you and I celebrate Christmas, remember that the birth of Jesus Christ, Son of God, is God's gift to us that comes as surprise into our world. No matter how prophetic the Old Testament prophets were, including Isaiah, they still expected the Messiah only to be some kind-of kingly figure **appointed by** God, representing God, God-like even. But they simply had no idea that the Messiah they foretold would be **God himself** in the fullest sense of the word, and coming as a baby.

As you and I celebrate Christmas, remember that for God to give the world his Son was extravagance beyond all measure. For the Creator to come and live among his people in human form, be close enough to teach and heal and love his people, and thus be close enough and

vulnerable enough to die a human's death on the cross for the sake of his people is truly spending beyond the Christmas budget, as it were, a gift with a price tag not one of us would choose to pay. But God himself did so choose.

As you and I celebrate Christmas, remember the pleasure God the Father had in giving his Son to the world. In a few weeks we'll read of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River. The Gospel writers recorded that at that baptism, a voice came out of heaven and said, "*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased . . .*" Know that it pleases God to share his life with his us, and to watch people the world over hear the good news, turn to his beloved Son, believe on his name, and live new lives of hope and goodness because of him.

As you and I celebrate Christmas, remember with humility that we cannot pay back, cannot possibly achieve any gift-giving equity against the gift of God to us. There will be no *quid pro quo* here, just receiving with thankfulness, and then following, following in faith the One who gives so freely of himself, the God to be worshiped and adored on bended knee, and then trusted with everything that is ours, ourselves included.

2,000 years have gone by. Generations have heard the story of Jesus' birth, his earthly life, his death on the cross, his resurrection to new life, and his call to us to join him in that new life. Yet though the story gets told and re-told, it is so easy, in the crunch and chaos of our busy lives, to forget this surprising gift, this extravagance of self-spending, this sheer pleasure God has to be with us, this unconditional love come down. And so it is good for us—**all** of us here—to gather together this night and remember the story. For in our remembering, we grasp the gift and unwrap it once more. **AMEN**