

The Gift

John 1:14, 16-18; 3:16-17

First Presbyterian Church

January 3, 2021

John 1:14,16-18

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, * full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, * who is close to the Father's heart, * who has made him known.

John 3:16-17

16 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Sermon

For God so loved the world that he GAVE his only Son...

Friends, this morning I want you to ponder with me the nature of gifts... gifts given, and gifts received. This is something we have recent experience with, of course... having just participated in that annual Christmas ritual known as "Opening the Presents." As you know "Opening the Presents" involves two separate, but related experiences... there is the gift *giving*... and the gift *receiving*. For me, the toughest thing is **gift giving** – going out (or "online") and finding just the right present for every person on our list. But for others the toughest part of Christmas is **gift getting**... that is, knowing how to receive presents in just the right way. I am NOT good at that!

Garrison Keillor wrote an essay in which he described an experience we have all had. "A few years ago," he writes, "someone near and dear to me gave me a Polo shirt for Christmas, and I said thank you, of course, and put it on, and tried to look pleased, but what I was thinking was, 'Burgundy?' In my experience, burgundy shirts are for guys who smoke cigars, drive a Buick LeSabre, sit in the dark corners of cocktail lounges and place large bets on basketball games. Me... I'm more of a wheat type of person... wheat or antique blue. But did I turn to the giver and say, 'Sorry, I'm an English major and we don't wear this color?' No, I put it in a special section of my closet where I keep never-to-be-worn clothes. And after the three-month "Christmas-gift-cooling-off-period" required by law, I gave the shirt to a shelter for the homeless. I hope it's being worn by someone." Then Keillor waxes philosophical: "A Christmas gift represents somebody's theory of who you are, or who they wish you were." In other words, a Christmas gift often tells us LESS about who we really are than it does about who someone thinks we are or should be. So, let's just stick with that for a second – if God is the Giver... and Jesus is the Gift... then what does that say about who God thinks we are... or should be? Scripture is quite clear - the birth of Jesus was not experienced by everyone as a great, glad gift. Just run down the list: An angel tells a teenage Mary she is to have a child out of wedlock... placing her entire future in jeopardy. At the news of Mary's pregnancy, Joseph is faced with ending his marriage agreement and starting all over.

There were many in Judea who thought what Israel needed was a military genius to come in, raise an army, and run the Romans out. Others prayed for a charismatic religious leader who would stay out of politics and stick to religion.

Now, it IS true that he *would be* a prince and authority would rest on his shoulders – but he would be a prince unlike any they had ever seen... a prince of peace. And he would be a charismatic religious leader – he would be the great high priest who in himself fulfilled all of the law and the prophets... but he would be a priest unlike any they had known before. Refusing to use God for his own benefit... welcoming people no one else would touch... naming sin as sin regardless of whose toes he stepped on... offering his very life in selfless love for others... For many Jesus was the gift they got, not the gift they wanted. Garrison Keillor said the best gift is the gift only you can give yourself... which is a lovely, if sappy thought. The trouble is, I can't be trusted to draw up my gift list... I can't be trusted to know what I really need. Can you?

So, God gave us what God wanted us to have. The One who created us and who knows us better than we know ourselves gave us the gift that reveals who God thinks we are... the gift that reveals who God wants us to be. That's what happened to us at Bethlehem that night. We got our heart's desire, but not in the form we expected, or even wanted. We got a baby. In a world that worships power and wealth, prestige, and strength, we got a baby... a poor, lowly, vulnerable baby. And when that baby grew up, he became even less what we want... challenging our notions of who God is and what God wants from us. He stuck his nose where we think it doesn't belong. He called us to leave our comfort zones and follow him. He showed us that power was indeed made perfect in weakness.

There are many skills which are required of the faithful Christian, and this morning we are reminded that one of those skills is the ability to be **surprised...** to be surprised by the way God actually comes to us... to be surprised by the gifts God actually gives to us.

It has only been in the last few days that I've had enough emotional and spiritual energy to think back over the year since last Christmas. I credit the vaccine rollout with much of that – thanks to government officials and tireless researchers and citizens willing to take part in trials, I am more hopeful now than even a few weeks ago... and though I believe our officials when they say the next few weeks will be very hard, my hope for the future has freed up some emotional and spiritual bandwidth for trying to understand and process what has happened over the past 10 months. Please forgive the understatement... 2020 has not been the year we expected. A global pandemic has created unimaginable chaos and has led to challenges and losses the likes of which none of us have ever experienced... the loss of more than 20 million jobs in a matter of weeks leaving an economy deep in recession despite record setting days on Wall Street... the continued reckoning – and wrestling – with our nation's history and present-day reality of racism and racial injustice... the ongoing experience of deep social and political polarization that was amped up and on full display in this election year. Of course, there are numbers of things worth celebrating and remembering with appreciation: Gutsy teachers and medical personnel... courageous truck drivers and grocery store clerks... parents and kids bonding over schoolwork... a new understanding of how vulnerable some of our neighbors are... creative cooking and crafting and decorating... new ways to worship and learn and stay connected... Yes, there are things to be grateful for. Still... 2020 has not been the year we expected... and what I know as your pastor... and what we know from our families and friends is that while all this has been going on around the world and here at home, our loved ones continue to face illness and dementia...

parents worry about children regardless of age... children worry about their parents... marriages strain under the weight of it all. We did not expect to be our children's teacher as well as parent... we did not expect to be denied our prom or graduation or sports season or the chance to leave college and start our career. We did not expect to postpone our wedding or the memorial service for a loved one or a special anniversary trip or time with our grandkids. We did not expect the hoarding of toilet paper (and now antacids) or wearing masks or socially distancing... doing drive-thru Wednesday Night Supper and Zoom Sunday school... or preaching into a camera. So much this year that we did not expect... or ask for... or want. And so, we search and search for some meaning... it's just part of being human that we want to find purpose in things that happen... and when we are people of faith, we want to find God in the things that happen.

Well, many people have said and written many things since March – some claiming to know exactly what God is up to/ Others is up – far more humble – affirm they might have some idea where God is and what God is up to, but will never say definitely. And still others simply and profoundly affirm that God loves us and is with us no matter what. And that is where I am at the end of 2020 and the beginning 2021. You see, it is not necessary to believe God caused what has happened in 2020 to trust that God is present and has “shown up” in the midst of it all... convicting us, forgiving us, challenging us, helping us... all the while, continuing to work for God's redeeming purposes. I will not say that God caused any of this... and I won't try to explain what is happening or why. That's not my job... it's not your job either... it is, as N.T. Wright has said, “above our pay grade.” Our job is to trust that out of a year like 2020 can emerge new possibilities... for acts of compassion and kindness, for scientific and medical advances... for new ways of governing and wisdom for leaders... for new commitments to justice for all people... and yes, new possibilities for ways of being the church of Jesus and of serving his kingdom here and now. Our job is to trust that God will do what God has always done – transform even our most significant losses... our most painful experiences... our most difficult challenges into gifts. For having welcomed the babe at Bethlehem... having received this gift we neither expected, nor particularly wanted... we can trust there will be other times when challenges become gifts, and when burdens are transformed into blessings. For again this year is born to us a child... a Savior... whose name is Jesus. He is God's greatest gift... God's perfect gift! And though we did not know how to desire him, he is the perfect sign of God's great desire for us.

Benediction

20 Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, 21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.