

The Gift of Christ

Pastor Tom
December 24, 2017 Candlelight Service

A reading from Luke 2:8-20 in the New Commercialized Version of the New Testament. “And there were in the great country to the north, children keeping watch over their stockings by the fireplace. And Lo, Santa Claus came upon them and they were sore afraid. And Santa said unto them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people – who can afford them. For unto you will be given a great feast of turkey, dressing and cake; and many presents, wrapped in bright paper lying beneath a tree adorned with tinsel, colored balls and lights. And suddenly, there will be with you a multitude of relatives and friends, praising you and saying “Thank you so much for the gift. It was just what I wanted.” And it shall come to pass as the friends and relatives have gone away into their own homes, the parents shall say to one another, “Hmm, what a mess to clean up! I’m tired, let’s go to bed and pick it up tomorrow. Thank goodness Christmas only comes once a year! And they went with haste to their cold bed and found their desired rest.”

Well it is Christmas Eve 2017. You have survived another season of busyness and frenzy so you can rest tomorrow and then get after the Boxing Day Deals on Tuesday. Yes, the Christmas season has become a multi billion dollar industry. But I don’t think the first Christmas was all this buying and wrapping. I don’t think many would dispute that buying and giving gifts is not the central message of Christmas. But what is? If all the extras were stripped away and we were left only with the core, what would remain? If we could share the central core of Christmas to someone tonight what would it be?

Well let’s look at some possibilities. **Possibility #1 – The essential message of Christmas is to uphold traditions.** There are so many traditions surrounding Christmas, that we just have to keep them or it just wouldn’t be Christmas. In fact, there’s a Christmas tradition for every letter of the alphabet. A – Advent Calendars; B – Boxing Day; C – Candles; D – Decorations; E – evergreen trees; F – Frosty the snowman; G – Gifts; H – Holly; I-Ivy; J – Jam; K – Killing (pets who have ruined Christmas decorations); L – Lights; M – Mistletoe; N – Nativity Scenes; O – Oranges; P – Plays; Q - quarrels; R – Relatives; S – Star; T – Turkeys – lots of dead ones; U – Underwear – what my mom used to give me for Christmas; V – Virgin Birth; W – Wise men; X – Family X-rays – you haven’t gone for a family Christmas x-ray yet? – Y – Yule Log and Z – the Zebra in the stable. Christmas is definitely a traditional season. But do these traditions contain the central message

of Christmas? No. So to get to the core of the Christmas message, we are going to have to tear off the layer of tradition. (Tear off outer layer of present).

Well what's another possibility? **Possibility #2 – Programs, plays & presentations.** Surely these are essential to the message of Christmas. If you've grown up in a church, you may recall being in a Christmas program from your earliest memories. The girls always fought over who got to be Mary. The boys drew straws and whoever lost got to be Joseph. But the best role was a shepherd where you got to wear a bathrobe and towel on your head and then get one of those staffs with a hook on the end. You could use that for a light saber fight just before going on stage. Then there are choir programs and the singing Christmas tree which can be a wonderful experience. But if someone asked us about the central message of Christmas, it would not be programs or pageants although they might bring the message. So we're going to have to go deeper. (Tear off second layer of paper).

Possibility #3 – The central, essential part of Christmas is Family. Yes indeed. Here is something that has got to stay. What would Christmas be without gathering together with family and close friends? The two terms seem synonymous. Christmas means family. More than any other holiday, people desire to be with their family at Christmas. I was listening to the radio a few weeks ago where they asked the question "what is Christmas all about?" The person interviewed said that Christmas has essentially become a non-religious holiday. It has now become a time where families gather together, you reflect on the past year and you go into the New Year with renewed passion. But is that really the core message of Christmas. Though family is vitally important and it's wonderful to gather together at Christmas, family is not the central message of Christmas. (Tear off family layer)

Possibility #4 – Well then, it has to be the Christmas story itself then. This is definitely it. This is what we have to remember at Christmas. Shepherds, angels, donkeys, Caesar Augustus, Manger, Cattle, Full inns, Mary, the star, Herod, Frankincense and swaddling clothes. That's the message of Christmas. But if you noticed that list of items and people from the Christmas story, I left out one crucial individual. Sometimes, even the Christmas story which carries the central message becomes central itself. We then end up being more amazed at the live sheep in the living nativity scene than amazed at the one who is central. So even the Christmas story and it's details have to be stripped away to get to the central message. (Strip off last piece of paper).

So there it is. A brown box. What do we have in here? It's a cross. What is that doing here? Well Christmas includes all that we have already talked about. But we have to start with the core message.

We've stripped away commercialism, traditions, programs, family and the Christmas story details. What is the central essential message? "Now I would remind you brothers and sisters of the gospel, I preached to you, which you received and in which you stand and by which you are being saved. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures and that he appeared to many witnesses. (1 Corinthians 15:1-3)

The baby whose birth we celebrate tonight grew up and died for our sins. He was buried and was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. That's the central message of Christmas.

The man who wrote the words I just read used to be a passionate opponent of Christianity. He was on his way to arrest Christians because he thought they were the worst people in the society. Then he met the living Christ who stopped him in his tracks. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me." He answered "who are you Lord?" Christ answered, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." After this encounter with the risen Christ, this Saul used his Greek name Paul and gave his life to proclaim the gift of Christ to anyone who would listen.

When we keep Christ at the core of our Christmas, everything else takes on a deeper meaning. Our family celebrations can be filled with the joy that Christ died and offers forgiveness for each one. Our programs are not just a production to get over with but an eternal message to deliver with potentially eternal impact. Our traditions can help us celebrate and appreciate the gift God has given to us in Christ. Even the gifts can remind us that the greatest gift we ever will receive is Christ Himself.

So that is my offer and hope for each of you here tonight. You might receive many gifts over the next 24 hours or you might receive few. But the greatest gift you could ever receive is Christ Himself. If you already have received Him, will you cherish this gift anew tonight and through the next days? Then as you prepare to enter the New Year, ask Him what He has for you to do with the New Year he presents to you as a gift. If you don't know Christ or don't know anything about that, will you maybe ask the person you came with about what that means? Or you can visit the table by the front doors on the way out. There is some info there on what it means to know Christ and come to Him personally. Please feel free to take what you'd like. I pray you would receive this greatest and most central gift this Christmas Eve.

To help us think further about this, I'd invite you to watch or just listen to a song and then we will go to the candle lighting.

To be played at the end:

<https://youtu.be/TYSJj-EHAAk>