

What Did You Get for Christmas?

[Luke 2:22-40](#)

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Sunday, December 25, 2005

one worship service - 11:00 a.m.

What did you get for Christmas? An engagement ring? A CD by your favorite orchestra—The National, of course? A box of golf balls? An up-to-date iPod?

Jimmy Smith wanted a trumpet for Christmas. He found one under the tree. Little Jimmy played that trumpet till his parents could not tolerate it any more. Finally Dad said, "Jimmy, outside with that thing!" Jimmy paraded up and down in front of the Smith house and the Jones house next door, blowing for all he was worth, stepping high just as he had seen on TV. This happened on the day after Christmas, too. Finally Mr. Jones came outside and said to young Jimmy, "Do you want to know what's inside that trumpet that makes all that sound?" "Yeah," the boy exclaimed. "Here," Mr. Jones said, "take this screwdriver and see if you can find out."

Are you pleased with what you got for Christmas?

An older widow had a daughter married to a serviceman stationed in Japan. They had three children. About the first of December, mother received a phone call from them. The daughter and the son-in-law were on the other end of the line. After the usual, "How-are-you", the daughter sighed through apparent tears, "Mother, it just won't seem like Christmas without you." There was a long silence. Then mother asked, "What do you and the kids want for Christmas? If I am going to get it to you in time, I will have to buy and send it soon." The daughter replied, "Mother, I wish that we could get together for Christmas. It just will not seem like Christmas without you. I know that you get lonely being there all by yourself, and we miss you." Mother paused and then said, "I have an idea. I will be spending a fair amount of money on presents for you and the children. What if I did not buy you any presents, and came to spend some time with you? I won't be able to send any presents—just myself." So, mother flew to Japan to spend the holidays with her family—the best gift that she could give, herself.

1. That is similar to what God has done. God gave us God's self in Jesus for Christmas, because God loves and wants us.

Doesn't it feel good to be wanted? What does it feel like to be unwanted? Remember the times that you were not invited to the party. Remember the guy on whom you had a crush and he did not want you. Remember the day that your spouse asked for a divorce. Remember how painful it is to not be wanted. You are wanted! That is a core message of Christmas.

Why would God want us? Read the news. Why would God want to relate with such dysfunctional people? Several of you spoke with me over the past couple of weeks. I asked, "What are you going to do for the holidays?" You replied, "I am going to visit my family and I dread it! All they do is squabble and put each other down." Why would God want us? I don't know. God just does. Biblically, Jesus used the metaphor of the father loving his children. (What salutation did Jesus teach us to use for greeting God? Our Father.) Why do parents want to see their children at Christmas? Why do parents love their children? Because they do! It comes with being a parent. Call it instinct. Call it God-given. We parents long to relate with our children and be with them for Christmas. Why does God want to be with us? Why does God love us? Why does God want us? Because God does. That is who God is and what God does. Tom Erickson used to tell us, "God loves you and you can't do anything about it." (Love that theology!) That is who God is. That is what God does.

To show this love and desire for relationship with us, God acted in a way that is both preposterous and grabs us at a primal level. God became incarnate in Jesus! God became flesh and blood. God became one of us. God was born to Mary as Jesus. Previously God had communicated through prophets and their teaching, such as Moses and the Ten Commandments. The message came in interventions, for example, the saving of the Israelite slaves from the Egyptians. In Jesus God added a new communication: a person! Jesus! We did not ask for him. Would we think of using incarnation to communicate? We do not deserve him. We may not even want Jesus. But, God offers Jesus as a gift, the divine self in a form with which we can identify. Why? Because God loves us and wants us!

God honored us with the divine presence! Could there be any gift finer than God, the Almighty, the Eternal, the Creator and Ruler of the Universe joining us to invite us into relationship. The incarnation of Jesus is the greatest gift of all!

Humbling. Overwhelming. Heart warming. Spirit lifting.

As the angels proclaimed to the shepherds: good news of great joy!

2. God's gift of Incarnation in Jesus is the finest gift, because he means that we are worth saving.

When we do not, even more—cannot, pass on the love and being wanted that God has given us, then we need help. We need help every day!

When I describe sin, I do it this way. I use the letters 'G', 'O' and 'I'. 'G' is for God. 'O' is for other people. 'I' is for myself. When we sin, the 'I' is huge, far larger than the 'G' or the 'O'. Or, the 'I' is far smaller than the 'G' or the 'O'. We can think too much of ourselves or too little of ourselves. Both are a source of temptation. When we are righteous, there is a balance; all the letters are about the same size. The essence of sin is too much thought about the 'I'. Life is about me.

The improper "I" produces sinful consequences for ourselves, for our relationships with our spouses, our families, and in society.

The church held a Christmas pageant. The innkeeper was played by a boy named Ralph. Ralph had very much wanted to play the role of Joseph--his 'I' dominated his thinking and feelings. He didn't get the part, and then refused to be in the program. "No! I am not going to be in that stupid program!" But his mother and his director insisted that Ralph do his duty and be in the program. So he was the innkeeper.

But Ralph decided that he would show them. When that portion of the pageant occurred in which Joseph inquired if there was room in the inn, Ralph the innkeeper grinned and announced, "Come on in. We've got plenty of room!" The audience gasped. Joseph and Mary were stunned. They expected to be turned away. Obediently, they walked into the inn. But the young man playing Joseph was equal to the occasion. He looked around, turned to the audience, and said, "Hey, this place is a dump. We'd rather stay in a stable!"

What to do with Ralph? What would change the big 'I' (really a pleading small 'I') which motivated Ralph to act up? He was not thinking about the integrity of the pageant, the impact upon the cast, the embarrassment of his mother. In an inverted way, he would be important. What might change that? Love and being wanted. The love of Christ in his heart would give him a different attitude. Believing that God wants him would soften his attitude toward others.

This is partly what we mean when we say that God came in Jesus to save us from our sin. "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, [why?] for he will save his people from their sins." "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a [what?] Savior....'"

Being given a Savior is a great gift!

3. A reason that Jesus is the greatest gift is that he can save us from the sin of mistreating and using people while being defensive about our "I".

As already said, the Incarnation is communication. In this case the medium is the message. The medium carries most of the message. Is it accidental that Jesus was born to Mary and in Bethlehem and laid in a manger? Of course not! Those were and are powerful communications from God Almighty and Eternal.

We are desensitized to the medium. It has been romanticized to the point of losing its power. Let's take a look at the meaning of Mary, Bethlehem and manger.

Who was Mary? We probably cannot catch the depth of the message until we understand Mary and her status.

We know that she was a devote girl. We say girl, because most of the females would have been married by the late teens. In her culture, what power would she have had? In fact, what power and influence do individual teenagers have in our culture beyond family and school? You teenagers, do you feel powerful to influence the world? As a group you influence buying and trends, but as individuals? The world does not revolve around one teen girl today. In those times, one teen girl would have had no power or influence. Zero. Heroines—they did not look among teen girls for them!

That was a male-dominated culture. The men made the decisions. The family doted on the boys.

Mary was young. She was female. Girls, what does that say to you about your value to God? And, she was from some little place that no one heard of, Bethlehem.

As if those traits would not be sufficient to exclude Mary from being used by God, we have to add that she was pregnant! Pregnant! Unmarried and pregnant! All these put Mary at the bottom of the social status. Except for being a female slave, no one was lower. Mary would not have been invited to our Christmas parties. She would be an embarrassment.

Why do I go on and on about Mary's low status? Because we have to be grasped by her condition to grasp the meaning of God's choosing her. Picture her in real life, not on a Hallmark card. God is giving a major message through choosing her.

Add to her condition two other elements of the Christmas story: the birth far from home and in a stable.

She and Joseph were forced, even though nine-months pregnant, to travel by foot and donkey in winter to Bethlehem. They were the little people that the powerful government in Rome could push around at will.

There was no place in the inn. They ended up in the stable. Again we have romanticized the stable. I grew up on a farm. Having a baby in a barn was not easy. Stables stink. They are filthy.

What is God's point? Why did God chose Mary and that setting? Why be incarnate in a baby from such?

Mary, the nativity setting, the birth of Jesus in such a setting—all together is a powerful messenger!

What does this mean to us, right now in 2005, Washington, D.C.? It means that every person is loved and wanted by God! The message is not private. God addresses me, true. God addresses me in relationships. There is no one of too lowly a status, to remote an origin, to socially out of it that God rejects or ignores them! If this is God's way, then we who know God should do the same! It applies in this building. We treat the custodians with the same respect as we treat executives. We treat people of minority races with the respect that God gives them. We treat people from other countries with the same attitude as God offers them. God's incarnation

in Jesus influences us very practically. Just as God loves and wants us, God intends that we love and want others of any status. There is no one who is automatically excluded from being treated well. People have to force us to not treat them as God treats us---that is where the Incarnation takes us. Because God loves us and wants us, we respond as a child to a loving parent. Our "I" is neither too small (and therefore defensive) or too large (and therefore egotistical) in relationship with God and others. In other words, we give to our spouses, families and other people the same attitude and behavior that we welcome from God. We love them. We want them. They are worth saving.

When the baby Jesus comes out of the ancient manger and enters our hearts, we become whole and sufficiently strong that we love and forgive and help and are positive. When the baby Jesus comes out of the ancient stable and takes residence in our brains, we think like Christ about God "Our Father" and think like Christ about all those people for whom he came. When the Messenger is invited from the ancient world to save us from ourselves, then we say to the angels, "Yes, we get it! Jesus is God's gift of Joy to the world."

* Dynamic Preaching, Dec. 1993, pp. 11-12, from Casey Zeach, Pflugerville, TX. Source: The Lutheran Witness.