
All We Want for Christmas

Luke 2:1-20

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 25, 2011, by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

Have you ever been so close to someone that you knew exactly what she would say before she said it? My good friend knows her husband in that way. A prime example of this was a few years ago at a Christmas celebration with her family. As a joke, several family members went together on a horrendous-looking sweater for their brother-in-law. When my friend heard about the gift, she said, "I know exactly how my husband will respond. He'll look at it, and in his most cheerful voice and with feigned candor, he'll say, 'I love it.'" The time came for people to open their gifts. With breathless anticipation everyone waited to see the reaction to the ugly sweater gift. There was a glint of horror in her husband's eyes as he opened the box. This was quickly masked by what could only be described as a valiant effort to show excitement and surprise. And then, as if on cue, he exclaimed, "I love it!"

We've all experienced something like this story. We've known the tension of wanting to be thankful for the gift someone gives while trying to maintain a semblance of integrity about our likes and dislikes. Deep down we know that both gratitude and transparency are virtues worth embracing. And in our responses to unwanted gifts, some of us have leaned toward gratitude and others have leaned toward personal integrity. In short, some gifts we want and some we don't, but either way, we want to be thankful.

A significant assumption in the way we give and receive a gift is that the very best gifts are the ones that we or others really want: like getting a pair of skates for Johnny, a sled for Suzy, and a Red Rider BB gun for that little boy in the movie *The Christmas Story*. We are often obsessed with making sure our gift is exactly what that special someone on our list wants. We all know folks who spend the entire extended Christmas season (you know, from the middle of July through Christmas Eve) consumed with the responsibility of buying the right gifts for all the right people. It's no wonder gift cards are so popular. We reason to ourselves, "If she chooses it, she'll get exactly what she wants. And that makes it the best gift."

If the best gift is the gift a person wants the most, I wonder if God is a very good gift giver. I wonder if the story of Christmas is a story about God giving the best gift. Let's consider a few of the characters of the Christmas story and imagine what they might have wanted for Christmas. Let's first imagine the Emperor Augustus. He had an empire to run. He had to perpetuate the *Pax Romana* and ensure the compliance of a diverse population. The Emperor had international politics to consider. At the beginning of Luke's story, the Emperor called for a census: a sure measure of his power and his kingdom's wealth. The Emperor didn't want any gifts. He wanted to take money from all the citizens in his empire. The Emperor was like the person who has everything he could want or need already, so there is no point in giving him a gift. Emperor Augustus didn't need to receive anything. He could take whatever he wanted. The Emperor was in control. The best gift God could give would be to refrain from meddling in the Emperor's realm of politics and power. But God gave a different gift than what the emperor wanted.

Let's think about the innkeeper. Business was booming because of the decree of the governing authorities. The first-century holiday season in Bethlehem must have been comparable to the craze at Wal-Mart on the Friday after Thanksgiving. The census surely was the time for businesses to move into the black. Yet, the innkeeper knew the struggle of being overwhelmed by his work. The innkeeper knew the stress of handling capacity crowds and of being over his head with demands that won't stop piling up. But like other busy business owners, the innkeeper did not necessarily want less work or fewer occupants. What he wanted was more time, better efficiency, more space, and greater

productivity. Maybe there's an iPad application to address these wants. But God gave a different gift than what the innkeeper wanted.

Another character in the story is Joseph. Joseph represents the people of Israel. Luke tells us he was of the house and lineage of the great king of God's chosen people. Joseph harbored the deep religious and political expectations of the people of God. Like his relatives from Bethlehem, he recalled stories of a by-gone era when all of Israel faithfully followed God as they lived in the Promised Land and worshiped in the temple. As a Jew, Joseph longed for the redemption of Israel. But there is more to Joseph. Betrayal and deep hurt overshadowed Joseph's personal circumstances. The fact that his fiancé's baby was not his complicated the joy of an imminent birth. Imagine the betrayal and jealousy Joseph experienced. Imagine Joseph's awkward and embarrassing conversations with his relatives: "Congratulations on your marriage. When was the big day?" "Do you think the baby will look like you?" What Joseph wanted for Christmas was surely a mixture of fulfilling both personal and corporate desires. He longed for the restoration of Israel, and something like a return to the days of King David, when Israel occupied the Promised Land freely. He also desired something to heal the betrayal he experienced, and he wanted a way to avoid the embarrassment of the baby's questionable paternity. Maybe Joseph's Christmas list included both a *Back-to-the-Future* sort of time machine to address his personal situation and a leader with just the right balance of political savvy and religious integrity to return his people to their glory days. But God gave a different gift than Joseph wanted.

Mary is the last character for us to consider. Mary knew the realities of being on the underside of society. She was a young, unwed mother to be. If rumors of infidelity spread, Mary faced endless possibilities of social and physical death. Beyond that, the absolutely ordinary, yet terribly precarious, event of childbirth loomed as she travelled with Joseph on the six-day journey to Bethlehem. But for all of the physical discomfort of the trip and for all the fears associated with childbirth, Mary may have carried another burden leading up to Christmas. Imagine travelling many miles to visit your new family in your spouse's hometown. Anyone who's had anxiety about being with her in-laws might sympathize with Mary. I'm speculating a bit here, but if Joseph's extended family was from Bethlehem why didn't they stay with them? I wonder if Mary felt unwanted when her new family left her out of the house when she was expecting so soon. Mary surely knew about being on the outside of the family, about being left in the night by strangers and ken alike, about being treated like an animal. What Mary wanted for Christmas seems pretty simple: a room, a bed, and a place of welcome within the household of Joseph. But God gave a different gift than Mary wanted.

In God's gift for Christmas, God did not abide by our "best gift" standards. Instead, to the politically powerful person who revels in being in control, God gave a vulnerable, dependent, naked baby King. To the overscheduled, overburdened, yet tireless worker who relies on the busyness of the holiday season, God gave a vulnerable, dependent, naked baby Lord. To the one hoping for a new religious and political era much like the good ole days where the right people led in the right way serving the right God, God gave a vulnerable, dependent, naked baby Savior. To the betrayed and embarrassed one who fears public ridicule and to the one with broken family relationships, God gave the vulnerable, dependent, naked baby Immanuel.

I wonder, "What do you want for Christmas?" Maybe what you want is similar to Mary or Joseph or the innkeeper or the Emperor. Maybe your wants are material in nature. You long for all that comes with a beautiful house or a nice car or the perfect coat. Maybe your wants are deeply personal. You know your job is shaky, or your marriage is on its last leg, or your loved one's health is fading, and all you want is to have a sense of stability and control in your life again. Maybe your wants are more communally oriented. You long for the power to make sure an election turns out right, or to stop climate change, or to resolve a world wide health crisis. But for Christmas, rather than obliging our material or personal or communal wants, God gives us a vulnerable, dependent, naked baby Jesus. And let's face it. Jesus isn't really all we want for Christmas.

God didn't give the characters in Luke's story all they wanted for Christmas. And God doesn't give us all we want for Christmas either. God gives the infant Jesus for Christmas. But the gospels tell a story of how Jesus encountered those who desired different gifts and gave them a chance to see God's gift with new eyes. The gospels tell how Jesus offered them another chance to receive him. The stories of the gospels reveal how Jesus overcame their objections and transformed their desires, so they might find joy and life in God's gift.

Think again about someone like Mary—someone with unlimited family drama. Later in the gospel story, Jesus encounters his mother again. One time when Jesus was travelling and teaching about the kingdom of God, someone spoke up to let him know his mother and brothers had arrived to visit him. Maybe you remember Jesus' response. "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." Imagine Mary hearing Jesus' words. Was Jesus adding yet another rejection of Mary to the family drama? No. Jesus offered a grander vision of family. Imagine the joy of knowing your circle of welcome has expanded infinitely. Imagine the comfort of a new family opened to you through Jesus. What a gift.

Think again about someone like Joseph—someone hoping that the right person would be in power so God and God's people might be glorified. Later in the gospel story, Jesus meets someone like this again. Remember James and John? They looked for the restoration and redemption of Israel. They wanted good people, like themselves, to be in positions of authority and power in that kingdom. But Jesus offered something else. "In my kingdom, those who wish to be great among you must be your servant." Imagine how strange Jesus' response must have sounded to them. But imagine the freedom of letting go of all your yearnings and strivings for a long lost past when people like you were on top. Imagine the awe of knowing that Jesus' kingdom comes when you find yourself at the bottom. What a gift.

Think again about someone like the innkeeper—someone whose work is overwhelming and all consuming. Later in the gospel story, Jesus meets this person in Martha. Jesus was Martha's special guest. Martha worked without ceasing. Much like my mother during the holidays, she was non-stop to get everything ready. Unlike Martha, her sister Mary sat at Jesus' feet listening to him. In her exasperation, Martha exclaimed, "Don't you care that my sister left me to do all of the work by myself. Tell her to help." Instead of assistance, Jesus offered something else. "Martha you're worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part." We don't know Martha's response, but can't you imagine the freedom Martha was given. All her worries about endless to do lists brought to new light, transformed because the most important thing was that Jesus was with her. What a gift.

Think again about someone like the Emperor—someone fixated on being in control and who depends on maintaining at least a façade of strength. Later in the gospel story, Jesus stands before Pilate. Pilate was the Roman provincial ruler of Judea known for his inflexibility, self-will and relentlessness. You remember Pilate's meeting with Jesus. Jesus was accused of leading a revolt and calling himself a king, so Pilate asked, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus replied, "You say so." Imagine Pilate's reaction to a king who didn't speak up for himself, who didn't fight to the end, who even embraced his coming death. And imagine Pilate's response when he heard that the crucified Jesus was no longer in his tomb. Could new life really be found in vulnerability? Imagine the freedom of not needing to be in control, of not having to keep up appearances, of not needing to ensure that everything turns out right. What a gift.

I wonder how the gospel story continues for you. Where has Jesus encountered you to transform your wants in light of the gift he is? Maybe this Christmas God is giving you a chance to receive God's gift anew. And isn't that what Christmas is about. Isn't Christmas about God giving people like us another chance for our objections to be overcome by God's transforming gift? Isn't Christmas about God reorienting our wants and desires, our longings and ambitions, our fears and pains, our brokenness and vulnerabilities in the light of this baby, in light of God with us? On Christmas, God gives us a naked,

vulnerable, dependent baby Jesus. And this is the good news of God's Christmas gift: because of Jesus, we no longer have to avoid or fear or run from nakedness, and dependence, and vulnerability because in them we meet God who is with us.

When you open God's gift this Christmas day, maybe on second look you'll say, "I love it!" and mean it.