Christmas Presents

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 2:1-14

By now, the malls are crowded, and stores are running low on a number of items and shoppers are playing bumper cars with their grocery carts. It’s not just a busy time of the year. It’s a crazy time. According to the National Retail Federation, the United States spent over $465 billion dollars on last year’s Christmas. The average person spent $935.58. That’s a lot of gifts. Commercially speaking, Christmas is so vital a season, it’s built into our economy. For merchants, if we don’t give, they don’t live! It is amazing how much emphasis is placed on gift giving. Apparently, it has always been part of culture, perhaps not to the extent that we see in our nation today. Still, gift giving has a long history.

And while we’re not supposed to talk about the wise men until after Christmas since they came after Jesus was born, most people in the United States, more or less mix Advent and Christmas together. You remember the Christmas carol, “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” the opening lyrics, “On the first day of Christmas my true love sent to me a partridge in a pair tree,” and so on until the twelfth day. It reflects a time when gift giving took place during the twelve days of the Christmas season, beginning with Christmas day. Here in America, it all happens on Christmas day, so that much of our time during Advent is spent buying presents for that one day. I suppose even the wise men had to acquire their gifts for the Christ child days in advance, so let’s talk about it this subject of gift giving. So what did it mean in Jesus’ day to give a gift?

In the Hebrew tradition, there are two kinds of gifts, the dowry, or “mohar,” a gift given on the occasion of a marriage, and the love gift, or “minha,” which was given for a variety of reasons. Whether the gift was a mohar or a minha, the important thing to consider when it came to gifts was, first of all, the benevolent intent of the giver, and secondly, the good faith of the receiver. In other words, how one gave a present, and how one received it, was the most important aspect of gift giving, regardless of the occasion or the type of gift. Giving and receiving then had an almost sacramental nature to it.

When the wise men brought Jesus their three gifts, the giving and receiving was seen as a holy moment for the givers and the receiver. The gift of gold is what was given to royalty, to a king. The gift of frankincense, used to create a fragrance when burned, was the gift for a priest. The gift of myrrh was a strong perfume used to anoint the dead. Symbolically, these gifts were given to recognize the lordship of Jesus, the priesthood of Jesus, and the sacrifice of Jesus.

These were the gifts to our Lord, according to Matthew’s gospel. But there were gifts the world received that Christmas day too, gifts that keep on giving all the way to us today.

**The first gift, I submit, was a star,** a reason to look up, a reason to hope. The days leading up to the birth of Jesus were very dark. It was a time of oppression and fear. Rome had a tight grip on Israel. But even more oppressive was within the faith. It was a time when forgiveness and compassion were sold to the highest bidder who could afford the temple taxes. For the poor, their religion had become a curse. To this darkness, there came a great light, a star; a pathfinder. We know very little about the star, or those who followed it. The Armenian Gospel records their names as Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar. Melchior, which means light, was thought to be the king of Persia, what is today’s Iran. Caspar, which means white, was thought to be the king of India, while Balthasar was presumably the king of Arabia. Whoever they were, they were tired of the darkness and cruelty of their day. It is hard to say what exactly it was they saw. Astrologers believe it may have been a comet, others believe it was a rare conjunction of Mars, Saturn, and Jupiter. Whatever it was, it was enough to get their attention. Scripture says that when they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

By the way, have you ever wondered what made the wise men wise? I’ve known plenty of smart people and a lot of foolish people, but not many wise people, a few perhaps. Ancient Greeks believed wisdom is knowing and appreciating what is true and good and beautiful. Biblical wisdom would declare that true wisdom begins and ends with God. In the book of Proverbs, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, fear meaning honor, respect, and devotion to the maker of all things. Wise people are those who are able to apply to their lives their knowledge of truth and goodness and beauty in the light of their faith in God. For those of you who watched the show Kung Fu, it is more than being able to snatch the pebble from the master’s hand. According to scripture, wisdom is trusting that God has a purpose and a destiny for you, and believing that somehow all the stars will align for that to happen, that in God’s providence, and as you heed God’s inner voice, your future will unfold. For Jesus, it included the very stars themselves.

In 1867, a girl by the name of Marie Sklodowska was born in Warsaw Poland. She eventually left Poland because there was no room in that society for educated women. She moved to Paris where she studied among the great scientists of the time. Later, as a professor, she told her students that some of them had the ability to catch stars at their fingertips. She married a man named Pierre. I suppose a lot of French women marry men named Pierre. In her day, most of the scientific community was convinced that all the elements of the universe had been discovered. But she believed there were other substances, very minute, but extremely powerful, yet to be discovered. Although brilliant, many thought her ideas to be foolish. She worked in poverty for years, until she successfully isolated and discovered the elements radium and polonium, elements that we know as the source radioactivity. The winner of two Nobel Prizes in Physics and Chemistry, Madame Curie devoted the rest of her life finding medical applications for what she discovered in the evaporation dishes of her laboratory, including the development of X-rays. She discovered one of the many gifts that originates from stars.

The wise men had a star at their fingertips too. What they saw, they knew in faith to be God’s finger pointing the way to salvation. In a world where human standards had become twisted, they found a star to guide them.

In 1802, Nathaniel Bowditch rocked the world with his book, The New American Practical Navigator, an incredible navigational guide based on the premise that stars travel in fixed patterns. Bowditch made it possible to travel by the stars with uncanny accuracy. Today, society is very permissive. Right and wrong is a matter of opinion. In a study by Rutgers University, over 60% of their students admitted to cheating over the course of four years. Of that, 16% revealed they had no regrets. Of course, unfortunately, what happens at Rutgers must be true for most colleges and universities. Apparently, many believe it to be normal to cheat in order to get ahead. And these are your future surgeons and lawyers, politicians, airline pilots. That same study revealed that the vast majority of students who admitted to cheating said they began cheating in high school, some clear back to elementary school. Today, for a majority of people, right and wrong is simply a matter of whether or not you get caught doing it.

And yet, there are some who still follow a star that never changes its course, promising the way that leads to a life built on principle, and a way that leads to eternal life. It may not always be visible, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t there. He is the way, the truth, and the life. His star never wavers. It’s always true.

**God gave us the gift of a star. God also gave us a song, a new reason to live.** I am so excited that we are a singing congregation. Our church is loaded with talent. Here, everybody sings. We have reason to sing.

It’s one of the gifts of Christmas, a song. It’s interesting that the song came first to shepherds when the angels paid them a visit. Someone told me that this time of year, police will sometimes pay people visits. They’ll stop someone on the road and instead of giving them a ticket, will give the driver a turkey or a similar gift. Now if that’s true, then the drivers who received gifts from police have a lot in common with shepherds, because these shepherds were not at first glad to see the angel. I know what I’m thinking when lights are flashing behind me. I mean, think about it. What would be your reaction if you saw an angel of the Lord. Not in your dreams, but while awake, while minding your own business. Speaking for myself, if I saw an angel, if an angel came to me, started talking to me, I think I’d be freaking out a whole lot. I’d be scared to death. Because, let me tell you, when angels come to visit you, it isn’t just to make conversation. They have something on their mind. And if they come to have words with you, you know that your world’s about to be rocked. My first thought would be “What have I done now?”

So when the angel came to these shepherds, these poor shepherds, you know they feared the worst. Which is why the angel said, “Don’t be afraid.” You have reason to be afraid, but don’t be afraid. I have “good news of a great joy.” And that is amazing because in Jesus’ day, shepherds were held in low esteem by high society. They were nomads, usually homeless, living wherever their sheep grazed. Priests called them “dirt people.” Because of their work, there was no way they could live up to all the laws of hand washing and temple regulations. Their flocks were too demanding, and the shepherds were too poor. Their life expectancy was somewhere between the age of 30 and 40. And it was to them that the angels sang “Glory to God in the highest….” The angels sang their song to shepherds, to common folk who needed to hear good news for a change.

One of my favorite things to do during Christmas is caroling. And one of my favorite memories is riding a street car in New Orleans, singing Christmas carols with members of my church on Christmas eve. One year when I was in high school, I went with several from my church to a seedy side of my hometown to do some caroling. It was kind of spooky. Many of the homes were vacant, rocks had been thrown in some of the windows. More than one occupant told us in no uncertain terms to go away. “Merry Christmas!!” “Go away!!” We were having second thoughts on the wisdom of our caroling when we approached the door of a man who lived alone. His clothes were torn and dirty. He stood there while we took a deep breath and sang the carols. When we finished, he was in tears. After a minute, he regained is composure and said, “You made my Christmas,” and then told us how his wife had died earlier that year and how the house had become oppressively quiet.

Of course, I know that this man probably never tended sheep before in his life, but I believe he had a lot more in common with those shepherds 2000 years ago than we did. The good news is to those who suffer. To the victimized, the ostracized, the marginalized, the angels sang, and the misery of life was replaced with a song, a new reason to live, because of the good news of Jesus Christ.

**He gives us a star. He gives us a new song. But above all, he gives us the gift of his Son, a reason to be joyful.**

In the Hebrew tradition, the birth of a son meant the birth of the future, the promise of future children and the inheritance of the family property. Let me hasten to say that I am glad some traditions have changed to allow the full acceptance of women in society with equal rights. Kathy and I have been richly blessed in having two daughters. But back then, having a son meant everything. The only thing worse would be to not have any children at all. It isn’t true today, but then, for a woman to go through life without having children was considered a disgrace, God’s punishment. But now, Mary had a baby, a son, and even though he was born in abject poverty, within occupied territory, to a peasant woman under questionable circumstances, for Mary and Joseph it was God’s gift, and not only to them, but to every succeeding generation.

There is no greater gift you and I can offer than the gift of God’s love, revealed in Jesus. Earlier, I mentioned the importance of the intention of the giver, and the attitude of the receiver. According to the angels, God gave us his son to save us. God’s intentions are clear. What isn’t always clear is the attitude of those who receive this gift. It was true then. It is certainly true now.

Several years ago, I was watching America’s Funniest Home Videos. There was a scene where a little boy was frantically opening a present on Christmas day. The present was a rather long box that required some effort. And with every tear of wrapping paper, the little boy would squeal, “I hope it’s my rocket ship! I hope it’s my rocket ship!” With each piece of wrapping paper he tore, his pitch would get higher, “I think it’s my rocket ship!” He got down to the bottom of the wrapping paper and by then he was completely beside himself. “It’s my rocket ship! I know it!” Finally, he got the tape off the cardboard box, yelling, “My rocket ship! My rocket ship!”

He opened the cardboard box, took a step backwards and said, “It’s a coat.” Then he kicked the coat back underneath the Christmas tree and threw a conniption fit right there on the floor on Christmas day. Of course, the scene was supposed to be funny, and I guess in a way it was, certainly what you would expect from a child, but my reaction was, how sad. The time and care and expense his mother and father put into getting him something he really needed, only to get that sort of reaction. It’s sad to see that in children, but they can be taught. It is tragic in an adult.

As he entered his public ministry, in time his own people were disappointed that Jesus was not at all the kind of gift they thought God had given them. But unlike the little boy’s coat, this gift wasn’t shoved back under the tree. He was nailed to it.

But for those who believe, who call on his name, he is the greatest gift of all. He is salvation, life itself.

He is the gift of love, and hope, and peace, and joy, the purpose behind the candles, the wreaths, the tree, the reason for the singing.

He is our light, our guide, our star, the song of the ages, the hope of Christmas past, present, and future, the fulfillment of John’s prophecy, the fullest expression of our heavenly father, distiller of wisdom, the way, the truth, and the life, the Word made flesh, King of kings and Lord of lords, the bread of life, the lion and the lamb, God with us, Immanuel, this son of Mary, this miracle child, the Son of God. It is to us the gift is given. May those who are wise, receive him still.

God of us all, blessed be your name. You give us the supreme gift of your son, Jesus. May we receive him in good faith, as if we depend on him for our very lives, which of course, we do. Amen.