

Mark D. Reichert

Christmas Eve – Luke 2:1-20 – God’s Greatest Gift for You

12/24/23 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

A little boy wakes up early on Christmas morning and runs downstairs to the Christmas tree. What a predicament lies before him. So many gifts, so few hands and so little time to open them all. Which one should he open first? Should he start small and work his way up, or go for the biggest right away? Which one to use first, which one to play with most? Eventually he decides to stop thinking and start enjoying, so he just grabs and rips and squeals his way to another wonderful Christmas morning.

But hopefully that’s not where it stops for this little boy. Hopefully it occurs to him that as great as all those new gifts are, there’s one gift that trumps them all – it’s his parents, who loved him enough to get those gifts for him in the first place. So the boy runs to mom and dad, gives dad a hug and mom a kiss, and says, thank you, thank you, thank you! I love you! And right then, that makes it all worth it. That little boy couldn’t be happier, and mom and dad brim over with love. That’s what makes their Christmas day.

And that’s really how it was on that first Christmas, too. This story tells us about Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the angels, and they’re like that little boy when he sees all those gifts under the tree. They can’t believe what their eyes see and their hearts feel – the fulfillment of all the hopes and dreams of God’s people since the beginning of time. But the gifts that were given to them that night were nothing without God’s Greatest Gift that he gave for them and that he gave for you.

See, this gift is one that God had been planning since the time of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When God first created this world, he created it flawless, sinless, intending that he and his people would live together in perfect harmony forever. But then one of his angels – we know him now as Satan – decided he didn’t want to live under God’s power and kingdom anymore, and he didn’t want humanity to have to, either. So Satan rebelled against God and convinced us to as well. That rebellion against God is called sin, and maybe it seemed small at the time – just take some of the fruit that God told you not to take; it’ll be fun, it’ll be good for you, and he probably won’t even notice! – but it had the worst of consequences. It ruined this world, God’s perfect creation, and brought suffering and disaster into our lives. It ruined our bodies, and

brought us pain and heartache and death. And worst of all, it ruined our relationship with God, and turned us from friends and family members into enemies and slaves.

And that’s a problem that every one of us still wrestles with even today. Maybe our God doesn’t tell us to stay away from the forbidden fruit that was in the Garden of Eden anymore – but what’s the forbidden fruit that you just can’t stay away from? Maybe alcohol, maybe drugs, maybe pornography, maybe extramarital sex; maybe bad eating habits or not taking care of yourself; maybe stealing, gossiping, greed, or lying; maybe dirty language, talking bad about the people around you, disrespecting people in authority, the president, the police; or maybe self-righteousness because it’s *not* any of those. But whatever it is, we all have one – probably more than one. And make no mistake about it, in God’s book, the wages of sin is death – death in this world, and death forever in hell.

But here at Christmas, we’re not talking about what we deserve for what we’ve done. We’re not talking about *wages*; we’re talking about *gifts*! We’re not talking about what we *deserve*, we’re talking about what we *receive* as a gift of God’s grace. And in fact, that’s what Christmas is all about. Into the darkness of sin, into the darkness of night, there came a gift of light. It was the one that had been promised for ages past, even all the way back in that Garden of Eden, when God vowed that he would fight for his people, that he would never leave us to die; and when he told Satan that he may have won the battle, but he would never win the war – “*I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.*”

What a promise, what a gift! God himself would make everything right again, with us and with this fallen world, and he would do it by sending a child, wrapped in cloths and placed in a manger. Maybe it didn’t seem like much – I’m sure it didn’t to Joseph and Mary, as they hunkered down in that stable, amidst all the hay and dirt and manure and filth. But sometimes the greatest gifts come in the smallest, the simplest packages.

They may not have seen the glory of that night. But it was there and even heaven itself couldn’t hold it in. Though this child was destined for a life of humility and lowliness, of service and sacrifice and suffering, for a few moments on that night, he got the welcome he deserved, and he was praised for exactly what he was: our Savior from sin. “*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks*

*at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you.'"*

God gave to this world his gift of salvation that night. He sent his Savior to crush the devil's head and do away with every wrong thing we've ever done, because we never could. We can't rationalize them, we can't explain them away, we can't bargain with God. We needed a Savior who could live the perfect life we were supposed to in our place and die the death we deserved so we wouldn't have to, and by God's grace that's exactly what he gave us in Jesus. Jesus was born that night to rescue us from what our sins had coming, to deliver us from the guilt and shame and every evil that our mistakes bring into our lives. Jesus was born to save us from nothing less than hell itself, and praise God that's exactly what he's done for us now. By his perfect life as our substitute, he kept God's Law flawlessly for us and gave us the credit, so that now when God looks at us he sees those perfect, holy, loving companions that he always meant us to be. And by his death on the cross, Jesus took away all your sins, defeated death and the devil, slammed shut the doors to hell, threw open the doors to heaven, and he promises you now that whoever believes in him shall never perish but shall have eternal life with him there in Paradise forever.

And so that means that along with God's gift of salvation, on Christmas night he also gave us his gifts of spiritual and eternal joy and peace. The angel said to the shepherds, "*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*" [Then] *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'*" Remember how we said before that because of our sins we were enemies with God who deserved only his wrath and punishment? Well for Jesus' sake, we aren't anymore. Because Jesus Christ came to fight and conquer the devil and all the forces of evil for us, we're on his side again and he's won the victory for us. We're not God's enemies anymore – we're his children now. We're not at war anymore, not in turmoil anymore – we're at peace with God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. We're not headed for hell anymore. We're on the path to heaven now. And that gives us a special, spiritual peace and joy that only come as gifts from God and that can never be taken away from us, no matter what happens around us, because he changed our whole world for

us that night. We don't have to wonder anymore what we're doing here or where we stand with God or what's going to happen to us when we die. We know the answer: salvation, peace, and joy forever, because Christ our Savior is born.

But you know, just like that little boy who realized that all the rest of his gifts were only as great as his parents who loved him enough to give them to him in the first place, that's the way it is for us, too. As great as salvation, peace, and joy are – we can't live without them! – God's greatest gift for you, and the one that delivered all the others, was his gift of himself. Remember what the angel said to the shepherds? "*Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*" This was the same child that was prophesied about, "*they will call him Immanuel,*" which means, "*God with us.*" God's greatest gift for us was giving us a glimpse of what life was always meant to be and a foretaste of what he was coming to make it again. For hundreds and thousands of years, the LORD himself had promised to enter our story and do for us what we never could for ourselves. God said, "if you want something done right, you have to do it yourself," so he himself promised to take away our sin and right every wrong. Our sin separated us from God, but he promised to bridge the chasm between us, to fix our broken relationship and bring us back together into perfect harmony again. He promised to live, die, and rise again for us, because that's what he had to do in order to bring us into his heavenly kingdom to be with him forever, just like he always wanted it to be. Yes, that was God himself, wrapped in cloths and lying in that manger. Salvation, peace, and joy came to us that night, because our God gave us his greatest gift of himself, so that one day *he* could receive us as *his* gift, too, and never let us go or ever lose us again.

So tonight or tomorrow, I'm sure you're going to give and get lots of gifts and lots of love. But remember that little boy with his parents, and remember that *presents* are nothing without the *presence* of God. And that's exactly what our God came to give us on that first Christmas night: salvation, peace, and joy, because God himself came here to be with us. That baby, the sinless, perfect Son of God was born to die in your place so that you will live; so that your faith in Him means life forever for you; so that your guilt is gone, never to return; and so that you are perfect in his eyes and perfectly suited to live with your God in heaven for all eternity. Yes, your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is God's greatest gift for you. So people of God, my brothers and sisters, Merry Christmas! Amen.