

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Christmas Eve
Year A

Duane M. Harris

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Text: Luke 2:1-20

Title: “Under Wraps: The Gift We Never Expected—God is Joyful”

(show video)

We celebrate Christmas in many ways. Spend time with people we love. Some of us have rituals that bring meaning to our lives: Christmas cards or letters, baking and then sharing the calories, rambling through the storage areas to pull out the boxes of decorations that grace mantels and walls and tables, erecting or cutting down a tree and revisiting memories of people and experiences that bring meaning and joy to our lives as those special ornaments are hung on the tree; coming to Christmas Eve candlelight service. We have our practices this time of year that feed our souls.

Last year was a particularly renewing Christmas for me. It was the year our son and daughter-in-law bought their first home. That isn't really what was renewing for me. What was renewing was that now he needed and wanted tools! Ask family and friends and they'll tell you I have a thing for tools. So when Josh said he wanted tools for Christmas, Lynn had to hold me back or I would have blown our budget.

He had asked for an electrical kit like mine. I'd put it together years ago with a tool box. I supplied that box with crimpers, wire cutters, wire nuts, electrical tape, and connectors. You name it, it's in my kit. So I spent some time researching the best box and the best deals and we went out and bought all the stuff. There were probably 25 or 30 pieces to this kit including the box. Lynn was going to put them all in the one box and just wrap the box, but I said nothing doing. He's going to have to open every single little item and so I sat there and wrapped each little package one night while we watched the Pistons.

What was renewing for me in all of this was that I had forgotten how much joy I experienced at Christmastime by giving gifts to people I love. Over the years I had just conceded all the gift-buying, wrapping and giving to Lynn. It just happened over the years. I get busy this time of year. It's an occupational hazard in my line of work, so Lynn carried that part of our life together. She did it all and I was happy to have her do so.

But I lost something in the equation. It might seem ironic for a pastor but I lost the joy of giving at Christmas time. I lost the real anticipation of sharing with someone else because I hadn't been engaged really. I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about what someone might like, didn't wrap anything, sometimes I didn't know or remember what we bought someone until they opened it. I missed the anticipatory joy of giving. That is until last year, when Josh wanted

tools.

Somewhere in the midst of the process it dawned on me how much I missed really being part of the process of giving. There is such joy in it when it's done intentionally, with care and love.

I expect that you know just what I mean.

It seems to me that there is something here that speaks to the nature of God. If we are in fact created in God's image as Genesis proclaims, then this desire for joy in our lives--the appreciation of and seeking after deep joy--is an expression of the character of God because God is the original giver. It is an elemental characteristic of God to give.

At the very beginning of the biblical story God creates the heavens and the earth. God gives shape to the earth and gives life to all creatures, give breath to human beings and all of it God calls very good. Have you ever looked into the night sky, peppered with the light of stars and planets and experienced a sense of awe? Have you ever sat on the edge of the ocean listening to the waves gently slapping the rocky shore and sensed the presence of God or at the very least recognizing that there is more to this life than you, that just being alive is a gift for which none of us have asked? God is a joyful giver of life whose giving character prompts the psalmist to sing:

For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. (Psalm 92:4)

The nature of God is to give and do so joyfully. From the Gospel According to John, we hear the well-known reason for Christmas: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world but that through him the world might have life." This coming of God is a gift to the world, not just the U.S. or Canada, not just Germany, France or England but also for Russia and China and North Korea, too.

And so we have this gift-giving God in the story of Mary and Joseph. It is in many ways a story of oppression. A tyrannical emperor orders the poor and maybe the not so poor to return to their ancestral towns in order to be taxed more effectively. The oppressive boot of the Romans stands on the neck of the occupied Jews. In a part of the world governed by Quirinius, someone named Assad now governs and the stories we hear of children being pulled from the rubble of war are consistent with the kind of oppressions the Romans inflicted.

The most recent TIME Magazine issue has a cover with a photograph of a newly born infant and the title: "Finding Home: The crisis in Syria has sent millions fleeing. This year, follow the lives of four babies whose families escaped." Joseph and Mary were not the last refugees on the move in that part of the world because people in power impose their wills on the innocent and powerless.

But notice that isn't the emphasis in the Christmas story. We don't hear about the rebellions that took place as a result of this decree of Augustus. We don't hear about the resistance to the halls of power. Instead what we hear is this young couple complying with the order, making their way presumably on foot or perhaps by donkey for the 80 or so mile trip. All eyes are on this humble couple doing what they are told. In spite of the injustice, that is not the focus of the story of Christ's birth. And once they get there—to Joseph's ancestral town of Bethlehem—the hotels are full. Not a room to be found.

Have you ever travelled all day and night without making a hotel reservation and decide you can't go any further so you pull off looking for a hotel room and you just couldn't find one? Or missed your flight at a connecting airport and there are no rooms available and so you spent the night sleeping in the terminal across seats that are more like rumple strips than a mattress? It's a wearing experience, exhausting.

Not only does the story of Christmas omit the oppressive circumstances under which the Holy Family is forced to travel, but neither do we hear exhaustion or anger from these two parents, just that her first child was born and laid in a feeding trough for livestock. It's an incredibly humble beginning for God's Son, the One sent "...not to condemn the world but that the world might have life through him." He isn't born into the halls of power. No glamorous gilded crib for him. All he gets is a simple, crude feeding trough. Vulnerable as can be.

Of course, that's not the way I'd probably tell the story of I had my choice. If I were to retell the story in our culture, I would begin with Mary and Joseph enrolling in a Lamaz class to prepare themselves fully for the coming of this new child.

And I would not allow Joseph to take Mary on a trip on foot of some 80 miles in her ninth month of pregnancy. Neither would Mary and Joseph have arrived and discovered that they had no reservation. I would have wanted a messenger to drive ahead to prepare the city for the coming of the Christ child. And I would have wanted that same messenger to book the best room in town as they awaited the birth.

If I were to tell the story of the birth of the Savior for our culture, they would have had a special birthing room already prepared for them, fully equipped with a fetal monitor, a restroom, and a chair which could be transformed into a twin sized bed in case Joseph needed to rest. The Holy family would have had the best of medical care under the most sanitary conditions. Nothing would have been left to chance.

It's also rather startling who was invited to witness this birth in Luke's telling of the story. Caesar Augustus was not invited. Quirinius was not invited. The important people received no invitation. Mere shepherds were told in Luke's account: handymen who smelled of the barnyard. My story would have also included other people: Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, people who had power in the world, like President Barak Obama, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, maybe the U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

Following delivery, the boy in my story would have grown up in a secure environment with a healthy, functioning family in a nice suburban neighborhood with no peer drug pushers to tempt him. He would be safe, tutored, prepared for the mission for which he'd been born. And he would have lived a long, healthy, prosperous life. No cross for my Savior.

But that's not the way this giving God of ours works. It's the unexpected ways of God that creates surprise and joy. I love this greatest story ever told because God does not work the way we think the powerful should work. God comes unexpectedly vulnerable and in the joy of a new life dependent on human beings to care for him. God chooses to become incarnate in a child not an emperor; a weak, defenseless baby, not a 5-Star General who commands legions. The way God enters the world isn't what we expect.

I love this greatest story ever told also because God doesn't even tell the right people. Instead of sending messengers to the governors and the Emperor himself, God sends messengers to field hands who probably can't even read. God sends a messenger with this heartwarming message of joy:

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

“Good news of great joy for all the people!” But first for illiterate field hands, the couple so poor they can’t even bribe an innkeeper to find them a room or better space than a barn. The joy of God’s coming isn’t shared first with those who are advantaged in this life. The coming of Jesus and the joy of his birth is shared by a choir with people who probably don’t even appreciate sacred music.

“Good news of great joy for all the people!”

Even though we tend to cut ourselves up into groups and hold those of other groups in suspicion, God comes for all the people, which is why Jesus is the Savior of the world, not just our world but THE world. And this greatest story ever told is so far beyond the way we might tell it and shape it if it was ours to tell and shape, that all we can do is decide whether we will join the party and sing with those messengers:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Another option, of course, is to pay more attention to other events in the world like that of a truck driven into a crowd at a place called the Christmas Market in Berlin where 12 people were killed and 48 were injured, as if Christmas could be killed right along with the innocent victims. Yet, God’s coming in Jesus just doesn’t allow death-dealers to win the day. In spite of all the oppression in that time and place, still the angels sing, still a baby is born, still joy rises above it all and refuses to allow death-dealing powers to overcome God’s joy.

This last week, I heard a story that brought tears to my eyes. It’s the story of a gym teacher in Santa Clarita, California. She was teaching her elementary school class and noticed some of her students were wearing rundown boots instead of tennis shoes, so she asked them to bring them the next day. When the next day came, she noticed one boy was wearing the same worn boots again. They were old, ratty, and just worn out. When she asked him about it, he told her “These are the only shoes I have.”

He wasn’t alone, either. The teacher said, “I see kids running in sandals or shoes with holes”. “Or we have kids who hot glue gun the sole on every day.”

She was so troubled by this that she went home that night and shared the story on her personal Facebook page which then inspired her friends to act. It wasn’t long until some of the teacher’s friends had gone out and bought the boy new shoes. The post was widely shared in the Santa Clarita Valley and the teacher found hundreds of pairs of tennis shoes lined up in her classroom.

The teacher’s own mentor walked into her classroom much to her surprise with two brand new pairs of shoes for children. She told her former student: “Whenever I am aware of a former

student doing something that's showing generosity and care for the community, it makes my heart sing."

Where can you find the newborn joy of God? I expect you can find Jesus born when you find what makes your heart sing. Don't look in the halls of power. You'll be disappointed. It's not the place of his birth. Don't look in those places or in those who use force or violence in order to impose their will. It's not the way God works. Christmas is the story of a God who comes in an unexpected child in complete vulnerability not to condemn the world but that the world might have life through him. He is the One who would in the Gospel According to John share with his disciples:

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (John 15:11)

May that kind of deep joy be yours tonight and always.