

“Be on the Alert: Huge Gifts Come in Small Packages”

Christmas Eve 2008

Ascension Lutheran Church

Life as we know it

Usually you can tell a gift by the size of its package; sometimes you have even asked for certain gifts, so you may know what is coming. For instance, the small, flat, 2 inch by 2 inch card probably holds a CD. Then again, something entirely soft and round is a Vermont Teddy Bear. But a gift that is hard and rectangular, with paper tearing across its hard, pointed edges, is probably a book.

Gifts are meant to surprise us, but many of us by this time have wise up.

We celebrate children at Christmas. Yet, a necessary part of being adult is looking at reality as it is.

For example, if we read behind the scenes of the nativity story, we know that life was harsh in Jesus' time, for most everyone; Jesus people, the Jews lived under harsh Roman occupation; the vast majority of them were poor, tax collectors (working for the Roman government) were hated because they would skim off portions of the take for themselves.

And, life 2000 years later for many people in the Holy Land is difficult and tense; the Palestinians, Christians and Muslims, live under occupation by Israel; their lives circumscribed, their hopes for normalcy cruelly diminished.

But, we adults know, life is never perfect; we see random violence and suffering of the innocents, especially children around the world. Governments plan for war more than for peace. We harm one another and are unkind out of unconscious ambitions, past hurts, or underlying anger.

This year may be a sad one for you and those you love: the first time without a partner or spouse, the first month without a job, the first Christmas since a child left home, or since a divorce or breakup.

Surprise

Yet, God speaks to adults and children! That's the good news.

Christmas is about surprise; for, truth be told, many of us in our hearts don't expect much; we may not know what gifts we are to receive, because we don't even know that there is a Gift Giver, or even that we need gifts.

Hallelujah! God knows this. And the story is addressed to us!

Clearly, even then, no one expected a child who would bring light to the world to be born on that fare off night.

Mary was a teenager. As Christians later meditated on the meaning of Jesus, they recalled stories that he was born in incredibly insignificant circumstances, without potential: a bed of hay, shepherds from the fields there the only human witnesses. Her husband, Joseph, older, and kindly.

Strangeness, smallness, down to earthiness of it all.

Huge gifts come in small packages.

Everything is turned upside down by this story.

In this world magnificent gifts from God, but they are not what we expect. They don't sometimes look like our visions of what we need or hope for.

Like the shepherds, like Mary and Joseph, you are on a journey, too, to understand gifts coming to you from God. What might these be?

Untying of knots in your hearts.

- Forgiveness of the remark made to you six month ago by a fellow parishioner, or even by a close friend.
- An easing of the responsibility you feel for your family, church, or work setting, which causes you anxiety, sleepless nights, and a sense of always being on the alert.
- A developing new friendship that may help replace the ache of the old one lost.
- A deep sudden compelling awareness that no matter what happens, you are loved.
- A moment between closing the car door after a day of errands and walking to the house where more responsibilities await, when you really see the white snow on dark green pine trees, and it captures your heart, and you feel with a catch in your throat that God is present in everything that is.
- A healing of early traumatic memory, that makes you are less cynical, more hopeful.
- Noticing how many stories you find and read and hear about of people acting with grace and goodness.
- AgGenerous impulse, that compels you to send funds you had earmarked for something else to Lutheran World Relief for children who have too little food, in memory of the child in the crib of hay. :
- An invitation to a wider life, more abundant life: a fun party, a new decision that you hear and accept to be more musical, or a decision to change jobs because it will help others; a decision to laugh and love more.

For, you see, Christmas is all about faith and growing experience of the power of goodness and love, and possibility and joy, despite much evidence to the contrary.

But if you allow this faith in the power of goodness and love and possibility touch you, you will—no doubt about it, you will change, your life will change. It will have more meaning than you can imagine, and you will need courage for the risk you are undertaking.

For God's plan is still unfolding. The incarnation (meaning that the Creator "became enfleshed, emmeshed in creation, itself) means that for those with eyes to see, everything is shot through with the light of Jesus' love, peace, and justice. And everything is on the move, changing.

New things happen: compassion, where there might have defensive reaction, peacemaking instead of violence, respect not disdain or forgetfulness for those on the outside of society; deep centering of life on God, as the strongest love in our life, willingness to be moved beyond comfort to risk more than you had intended for love, compassion, justice, and peace:.

Thus, we saved by Jesus from our small to our larger selves by Jesus. On the one hand, he will take us from a childish to an adult love. Jesus "begged us not to limit our love to the people that we are biologically tossed together with or romantically drawn to." He taught us to love our enemies.

On the other hand, he will make us children, excited and expectant about great gifts. If you accept this transforming love, you embark on the greatest live-changing adventure possible in life, simply by following Jesus. And, you may be surprised to recognize yourself as a gift given for others.

Amen.