

Sermon Series: "Receiving the Gift"
Salem United Methodist Church
Luke 2:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12; John 1:1-5; 9-12
Christmas Eve 2014
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Tonight is the night that many children have been waiting for since say at least Thanksgiving. There have been trips to the malls, online buying, visits with Santa, and Christmas parties. Adults are excited, too, about tonight because we can't wait to see the faces on the children when they receive their gifts. During the last four weeks of Advent, we have been examining what the process of receiving is all about. Tonight we are given a gift. Are we ready to receive it?

Receiving is a process. First, we have to want the gift. This is why we ask each other, "What do you want for Christmas?" We want to know that the gift we give will be well received. The second part of receiving is waiting for the gift. We live in a culture in which we do not tolerate waiting well. We don't like to wait in line. We don't like to wait in traffic. We don't like to wait for weeks for a package to be delivered. Even children have trouble waiting. Many have found their parent's hiding place and peeked at their gifts. Waiting requires patience which many of us don't have. The third part of receiving is actually opening the gift. If we leave the gift unopened, what good is the gift to us? There was a young man who wanted a car for Christmas. His parents promised him one. On Christmas morning there was a gift wrapped in thin tissue paper from his parents. He could see that it was a Bible. Anger welled up in him. He didn't want a Bible for Christmas. He wanted a car. When his mother handed him the gift, he threw it across the room, yelled some expletives at his parents, and stomped out the house never to return. His parents tried to contact him repeatedly, but he wouldn't respond to them. For ten years they were estranged from each other. Then both parents were tragically killed in a car accident. The son was tasked with clearing out their home. He found the Bible his parents tried to give him still wrapped in the thin tissue paper. He slowly opened the gift. Inside the Bible there was a note and a check. The note read, "Dear Son, Merry Christmas! We are so proud of you. We wanted to give you two gifts. First, this Bible, it is one of the treasured heirlooms of our family. It belonged to your great-grandmother, who taught Sunday School for many years. We thought you would like to have it. And second, here is a check so you can buy the car of your choice." This family suffered ten years of unnecessary heartache and separation just because the son refused to open a gift, refused to receive the gift. The fourth part of receiving the gift is embracing it. There are many pictures taken on Christmas morning of children embracing the wanted, much waited, and opened gift. To receive a gift we must accept it, and welcome it into one's life.

Our Christmas traditions with Santa Claus and the spirit of gift giving and receiving all originate with the readings from the Gospel of Luke and Matthew. Each of these readings in their own way share how God gives humanity the gift of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love wrapped up in swaddling clothes lying in a manger, a newborn King to be worshipped.

Our world needs this gift. We need this gift. Many feel hopeless and depressed. Many are not experiencing peace. Then there is the artificial happiness we try to create with holiday splendor, but this will disappear as we pack away Christmas. And then add the stress of all the shopping, decorating, cooking, wrapping, and social obligations. As these stresses mount, many of us feel anything but loving. Why do we put ourselves through this every Christmas season? Because we forget to receive the gift given to us in Jesus not just at Christmas, but every day. This gift is meant to transform our selfish nature into one that puts God first in our lives. With the receiving this gift, God transforms us into people who care about the world. With the receiving of this gift, God can turn our despair into hope. This gift reminds us that God is always with us. With the receiving of this gift, God can create a peace within us that words cannot describe. This peace can transform conflicts as we seek forgiveness

when we have wronged another, and it forgives those who have harmed us. With the receiving of this gift, God offers joy even in the midst of grief, unemployment, poverty, loneliness, and abuse. This joy cannot be stolen by any of our problems. With the receiving of this gift, we know that even in the midst of our troubles, we are children of the most High God who does care for us. With the receiving of this gift, God offers love, like newborn babies offer us. Who hasn't held a baby and not felt love?

God's gift of love in this babe in the manger can soften even the toughest heart. The Apostle Paul explains how we are to love in his letter to the church at Corinth. Chapter 13 in 1 Corinthians, the "Love Chapter," is often read at weddings. Paul wrote that love is patient and kind, slow to anger. Love is not arrogant or rude. Love trusts in God. When love rules, everybody wins. This love never ends. It just multiplies! Love is the reason for the season. Love came down at Christmas. When we feel distressed during our Christmas preparations, remember this rewrite of Paul's "Love Chapter."

"If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love, I'm just another decorator. If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love, I'm just another cook. If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love, it profits me nothing. If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir's cantata, but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point. Love stops the cooking to hug the child. Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse, family member, or friend. Love is kind, though harried and tired. Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens. Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way, but is thankful they are there to be in the way. Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return, but rejoices in giving to those who can't. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails. Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust, but giving the gift of love will endure."

And finally there is the gift of Light. We speak this evening about Jesus being the Light of the World, the Light that shines in the darkness. Have you ever tried to capture darkness in a box or a bag, and then go into a lighted room and release the darkness? Does the darkness over power the light? No, but if you are in a dark room, one small candle can illuminate the entire space. No matter how dark our lives can get, God's Gift of Light can overcome the darkness.

God knows we need the Gift, even if we don't know it. God knows we need the Gift, even if we refuse to want it, to wait for it, to open it, or to embrace it. God continues to offer this Gift, waiting for us to receive it. There is so much in our world that wants to steal this gift from us and will. This is what Christmas is all about, receiving God's Gift to us. We come here on Christmas Eve to receive something special as we sing Christmas carols and light candles. We can have this special gift every day. God offers it to us all the time. God does not offer the gift of Jesus to us to condemn us, but to save us from ourselves. This gift is for you and for me. All we have to do is receive him. We sang this verse earlier. Did you hear the words? "How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n! So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."

Giving God, prepare me to receive everything You have for me in Christ Jesus this day and every day. Amen.

Resources: *All I Want For Christmas* by James Harnish; *Won't You Let Him In?* by James Moore; *Christmas is Not Your Birthday* by Mike Slaughter; *Not a Silent Night* by Adam Hamilton