

Sermon: "What Gift Shall We Bring?"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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## CHRISTMAS GIFTS

I'm sure you heard it at least once this season. "You shouldn't have. That gift is too much!" Their words said, "No, no, no" but their eyes said, "Wow, what a gift!"

We love that moment. We love to give good gifts to those that we love. Even though we complain about the commercialization of the Christmas season, most of us will continue to participate for this one reason. We want that special person to know of our love.

But, what do you get for a person who has everything? You know the person I'm talking about. You may even be the person I'm talking about! They say each year, "I have everything. If I want something, I can go out and buy it. Don't buy me anything for Christmas this year."

Now I have great sympathy for a person like that. Much money is wasted on useless gifts. People can go crazy in their attempts to find the perfect gift.

In my family we have spent a lot of money on gifts this Christmas. I know some of you may have done the same. We sometimes feel a bit guilty about all the excess, but there is another side to the story.

The giving of gifts is a way to express our love. And in that sense, it is not a waste at all. It is wonderful celebration of the joy that is in our hearts during this glad season.

You see, those who criticize the gift giving of this season sometimes fail to understand that giving a gift is a symbolic act. People have a need to give when they have great love for another person. I think that what Calvin said about the sacraments is also true of gifts given from the heart. They are an "outward sign of an inward and spiritual work."

## EXCEEDING GREAT JOY

Gifts can also be a concrete way of expressing an inward feeling of love and affection. And I think that was especially true long ago when the Magi brought their gifts to the Christ child. They were giving from the heart. Their gifts were a symbol of worship and praise.

The Bible tells us, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." Matthew 2:10 (KJV) The Magi were overwhelmed when they knew that they would soon find the Messiah, and their precious gifts were merely an expression of their worship.

We performed a song entitled "They Rejoiced With Exceeding Great Joy" on Christmas Eve, and many of you told me that it was your favorite. I think I know why.

That song conveys musically a sense of great joy. It conveys what the prophet Isaiah meant when he wrote, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness--on them light has shined." Isaiah 9:2 (NRSV)

## LOOKING FOR THE LIGHT

We too are people who long for the light. We long for the light of God's presence to dispel the darkness in our soul.

We live in a world filled with fear and uncertainty. There is the fear of terrorism. There is the fear that some force of nature may come into our life and wash all that we love away. There is the fear of losing the one we love.

What we need in a world of fear is not a false assurance that everything will be okay. Even the smallest child knows this is not true. What we need is the assurance that God is with us through it all, that God will help us to have hope and spread hope where there is fear and longing.

In short, we need an epiphany. We need to see God.

#### OPENING OUR TREASURE CHESTS

So what would we do if it happened? How would we change if we were confronted with the light of God's presence? How would we express our joy at this epiphany? What gift would we bring to the Christ child?

The Scripture tells us how the Magi reacted. The Magi opened their treasure chests and offered Jesus precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Have you ever considered how much it cost the Magi to get just a glimpse of the Messiah?

How much money did they spend to make the trip? How much time were they away from their families in a foreign land? What dangers did they have to face?

The Bible doesn't tell us but we suspect that the cost must have been great. But, no matter how great the cost, no matter what the danger or the personal sacrifice, the Magi thought it was worthwhile. They were willing to give everything in order to just get a "glimpse" of the Savior.

How much are we willing to give in order to get a glimpse of the Savior? Are we willing to leave home? Are we willing to face danger? Are we willing to open up our treasure chests in the presence of Christ?

#### NO SPIRITUAL BARGAINS

In the new year everyone is looking for a Christmas bargain. Christmas cards are half price, and you can buy sweaters for a song. But, it is not possible to buy an epiphany on the cheap. There is no such thing as a spiritual bargain. God loves us too much to say, "Hey, this year we just won't exchange gifts."

Instead God tells us, "This year, like every year, I'm going to give you the best gift of all. I'm going to give you the gift of my Son, Jesus. I'm going to give you the gift of the Spirit. I'm going to make an appearance in your life this year."

How do you respond to a God like that? You know that you can't match His gift, but you also know that you have to give Him the best that you have. So, like the Magi, you open up your "treasure chest" and bring Him gifts. Out of deep gratitude, you bring precious and symbolic gifts to the Savior.

Is God in your life? Have you seen the light, His star in the east? Are you, like the Magi, a searcher who longs to get a glimpse of Divinity?

Bring your gift to Him out of joy and thanksgiving. Open up your treasure chest to the King of kings. Spread some light in a world filled with deep darkness.

Gifts are not optional when seeking the light of God's presence. All of us have a need to give in response to the love of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

#### AN EXTRAVAGANT GIFT

Of course I know what some will say.

"Pastor, I'm sorry. I'm all tapped out. I don't have anything to bring. The events of this year have taken everything from me. Don't you remember the hurricanes? The losses have been too great. I'm sorry, but this year has not been a good one."

Gifts to God are not made on the basis of how well things went this year. Some think that if we have a good year then we give a lot, and if

we have a bad year we give less. But, it doesn't work that way.

Gifts to God always need to be extravagant expressions of love and gratitude. Gifts to God are given with the same sense of anticipation we feel when we buy someone we love a very expensive Christmas gift. We say something like,

"I can't wait until she opens her gift on Christmas morning. She will really be surprised."

That's how we give to God. It brings us a sense of joy and even anticipation and hope. And just as giving all we have and all we are to the one we love changes us for the better, so giving all that we have and all that we are to God in Christ changes us in an even greater way.

We become better people, better Christians when we open up the treasure chest of our life and give precious gifts to God.

It is a profound part of our worship.

#### A GIFT OF WORSHIP

Let me be honest with you. I am sometimes discouraged with our attitude when we take up the offering during the church service. People chat with one another to the point of drowning out the sound of the music being played on the organ. It's almost as if we are saying, "Okay. The important stuff is over with. Now let's pass the plate and head to Fat Boy's for lunch as quickly as possible."

But, this passage suggests to me that taking up the offering is a high point of dedication and love. You are the Magi. You have seen the star. You have approached the throne of grace, the very presence of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Now, out of unspeakable gratitude, love and affection, you open your treasure chest and give. You bow before the one born King of Jews. You give not only your money, but more importantly you also give yourself to Him and His kingdom. The gifts we give this day and every day are indeed an outward sign of an inward and spiritual work.

In one church I served, we brought our pledges forward at the beginning of the year, kneeled at the communion table and then placed them in the offering plate. I was deeply touched by the looks of devotion on many of the faces that day. It was as if the action of kneeling let us know that giving our gifts was an extremely important part of worship.

Kneeling helped us make the connection between loving God and giving gifts.

I won't have you kneel today, but I do want you to think about the importance of the gift you bring to God this day. I want for you this day what I want for myself, an epiphany. I want to see and hear the Spirit of Christ in our worship. I want to be changed so much by this vision that I will give good gifts to Jesus out of gratitude and love. I want something other than business as usual.

#### A DIFFERENT ROAD

The Scripture tells us that the Magi learned in a dream of Herod's treachery, and so they went home by another road. Of course they went home by another road to avoid being captured by Herod. But, I wonder if we could also take that phrase in a symbolic way?

Don't we go home by a different road when we see the light of God's presence in Jesus Christ? Don't we go home by a different way when we fall down and worship the Lord to the point that we are overwhelmed by joy and awe? When we open up our lives and give the best that we have are we not changed by our act of devotion?

All of us here today have a need to go home by a different road. I'm not saying that we need to go home by Michigan Avenue instead of John Young Parkway.

I'm saying that we need to go home with different priorities and different values. I'm saying that we need to go home changed by what we have heard and seen.

I'm saying that we need to go home with a renewed sense of the good news that God is indeed with us. I'm saying we need to go home understanding in a new way that God is closer, oh so much closer to us than we first thought.

The star is indeed shining into our dark world. There is a great light in what we once thought was a formless void. The one who created it all is recreating, making it all new and making us new as well.

#### GIVING UP EVERYTHING

I've seen it many times as I've counseled with young people going into the ministry.

This young man happened to be a lawyer. Everyone told him not to do it, that he could serve God as a lawyer, that he would take a big cut in his hourly rate if he did this. It didn't seem to faze him.

It seems that the pesky Spirit of Christ just wouldn't leave him alone. He went home at lunch and told his wife that they would be leaving for seminary. The kids would have to make do with public schools instead of private, and by the way, she would be going back to work.

If his friends couldn't convince him, maybe she would. After all, she had a lot to lose in all this as well. But, she had a vision of something greater too. She told him, "I've been thinking all along that we should do this."

And so began the great adventure, giving up all they had and loved so dearly in order to pursue this dream, this sense of being called, and this powerful presence that had somehow come into their lives.

The presence of God still calls the Magi from far and wide. The Magi are the wise men and women who want to know God more than anything else. They are seekers who have a burning desire to see the light of God's presence.

You can't put a price on an epiphany. You just open up your treasure chest and give everything you have.

Giving everything seems like such a foolish thing to do. And yet, I have come to believe that giving everything is necessary. If there is some area of life that we hold back from God, then our spiritual experience will always be incomplete.

The great spiritual leaders of history often began their journey by giving up everything for the sake of the kingdom. St. Francis, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King and others made great personal sacrifices in order to make spiritual gains.

If your spiritual life seems dry, perhaps the problem is that you are holding on to something too tightly.

Perhaps God is calling you to turn loose of something, to open up your treasure chest and give some great gift to Jesus.

#### AN APPROPRIATE GIFT

But, what gift should we bring to Jesus?

My father was a great gift giver. Every year at Christmas I think of the great gifts he used to give.

He took great delight in finding out what his loved one wanted and buying it for them. He always bought a gift based upon his knowledge of the person for whom the gift was intended.

Perhaps we should take the same approach when buying a gift for Jesus.

What would Jesus want?

Would he want great cathedrals, monuments to power and glory? I don't think so. Once when his disciples were admiring at the fine

stones of Herod's temple, Jesus told them that it wouldn't last. Even the most impressive edifice would soon fall he said.

Perhaps Jesus would want an army to make sure that the kingdom is safe? Many armies down through the ages have marched under the banner of the cross.

But, again, I think that would be a gift based more upon what we want than what Jesus would want. In our story for today, Herod had an army and power. But, Herod was not the real king. To be a king means more than just having power and being willing to use it. Being a king means being willing to use power for the good of all.

Jesus said that those who live by the sword die by the sword. Jesus was even willing to die on a cross instead of perpetuating the cycle of violence.

## THE GIFT OF COMPASSION

No, I don't believe Jesus would want the gift of a secure kingdom or a fancy church or anything we could buy at the mall.

Instead, I believe a good gift for Jesus would be the gift of compassion toward those who have the greatest need. The Bible teaches us that when we give gifts to those who need the basics of life, like clothing, food, or water, we give a gift to Jesus himself. More than that, we actually experience the hidden presence of Christ in the lives of these people. (Matthew 25:40)

In that regard, I guess this year's gift for Jesus is a "no brainer."

In the bulletin today, I've listed information about what we can do through the church to help the victims of last Sunday's earthquake and tsunami. The Presbyterian Church has pledged that none of the money given for this cause will go to administrative costs. We will absorb those costs so that all the money will go to the people in need.

More than that, we have contacts in all of these regions who will help us get resources to the people who need it most.

My friends I cannot promise you a year without earthquakes or hurricanes or tsunamis. I cannot promise that we will all be secure in every way this year. But, I can promise you that the gift you give to Jesus will not be given in vain.

I was especially touched by the words of a preacher who has young children. She wrote,

"The greatest gift we can give our children is not a fleeting illusion that 'all is calm, all is bright' -- they're far too observant to be taken in by that for long, especially if we don't believe it ourselves.

We give a far greater gift to our children by teaching the meaning of compassion -- that great tragedy and great need are met by greater love. We teach them the meaning of hope -- that we recognize both the darkness and the fundamental truth that the deepest darkness must give way when it meets light.

That's something we have to be deeply in touch with ourselves to pass along to our children, and to share with our world."

Today we once again share the Lord's Supper. There are some words that I always say in a prayer after we partake of the sacrament. I say something to the effect that "as Christ has served us so we go out to serve others in His name."

This is our charge and our privilege, to bring good gifts to Jesus out of gratitude and love. Let us once again bring our gifts to God.

Amen.

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