

**“Christmas Presence”**  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent**  
**December 20, 2020**

**First Scripture Reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16**

<sup>14</sup>The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>15</sup>In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. <sup>16</sup>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

**Second Scripture Reading: 1<sup>st</sup> John 3:1a**

<sup>1</sup>See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.



**Sermon: “Christmas Presents”**

As we arrive on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we come to the last in our series of great Christmas traditions and how they illustrate what we believe about this season. Three weeks ago, we talked about Christmas lights that remind us of Jesus Christ, the light of the world. Two weeks ago, it was Christmas Trees as symbols of the life we receive in Christ. Last week Mary celebrated Christmas Carols as expressions of the Joy God gives us, and today, we take a look at Christmas Gifts.

I hope you’ll forgive me, but shopping for, giving, and getting presents has always been one of my favorite things about Christmas. When we were children, my sisters and I would pour through the Sears and JC Penny Christmas catalogues, marking everything we wanted with our initials. By the time I was done with those catalogues, they had more “Bs” than an apiary.

I never got everything I marked, not even most things, but the excitement of all those possibilities was itself a treat to be savored. And then, waking up on Christmas morning and tearing into all those brightly wrapped packages was definitely a highlight of my childhood. And I guess to some degree, I’ve never really outgrown that.

American humorist David Sedaris shares my love of presents. In an article he wrote for Esquire Magazine in 2002 about the variety of ways that people celebrate Christmas, he made this abundantly clear. “People who traditionally open gifts on Christmas Eve,” he writes, “seem a bit more pious and family oriented than those who wait until Christmas morning. They go to mass, open presents, eat a late meal, return to church the following morning, and devote the rest of the day to eating another big meal. Gifts are generally reserved for children, and the parents tend not to go overboard. It’s nothing I’d want for myself, but I suppose it’s fine for those who prefer food and family to things of real value.”<sup>1</sup>

Okay, maybe he goes a little too far, but gifts are fun. Searching for and picking out just the right present, buying them, sneaking them home so your kids don’t see them, wrapping them up and slipping them under the tree. I love the whole thing even more now as an adult than I did as a child.

The problem is, Christmas isn’t supposed to be just about gifts. It’s about being with family and friends and peace and goodwill, right? These are the things we traditionally associate with Christmas, but the trouble is, they are not what Christmas is all about either.

Yes, the Magi brought gifts and the Angels spoke to the shepherds of peace on earth and goodwill to all, but if you think about it, so much of what we associate with Christmas seems to have no real root in the Bible story of the nativity. That’s why the puritans banned Christmas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They saw it as a distraction from spiritual discipline and as such, it dishonored God. The Massachusetts Bay colony actually passed a law punishing anyone who celebrated Christmas with a fine of 5 shillings.<sup>2</sup>

My, how things have changed. A Gallup poll shows that last year, 93% of Americans celebrated Christmas.<sup>3</sup> But I’d venture a good number of those people didn’t really understand what they were celebrating. We were watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*<sup>4</sup> at my house the other day and I got to thinking about how disillusioned Charlie Brown gets by all the traditional trappings of Christmas. Nothing unusual, mind you. Just the standard Christmas stuff. And part of what is so interesting about that show is that when Charlie Brown asks, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” Linus answers by reading from the Christmas story in the gospel of Luke. Because that’s the story of people learning they have been given a great gift.

Christmas is not supposed to be about “stuff.” It’s not about “more;” it’s not about racking up credit card debt and throwing the perfect party; we know that. But it’s not even really about family and tradition and charity. See, things like

spending time with people we love, sharing and being compassionate toward others, especially those less financially stable, are all practices that we have come to associate with the celebration of Christ's birth. But wonderful as they are, those things are not the point of Christmas. They are our response to it. And we *should* be doing them *all year*. Not just at Christmas.

So, then what is Christmas all about? Well, for starters, Christmas is not about what we do at all. It's not about *our* charity, *our* compassion and the gifts *we* give each other. Christmas is about God. It's about *God's* charity, *God's* compassion, and the gift *God* gives to us.

Another classic Christmas movie is "A Christmas Story."<sup>5</sup> It's the story of a little boy whose single greatest wish is to get a bb-gun for Christmas. And not just any bb-gun; an "Official, Red Ryder, carbine action, two-hundred shot, range model, air rifle." Everyone tells him "You'll shoot your eye out, Kid;" his mother, his schoolteacher, even the department store Santa. But in a sweet moment near the movie's conclusion, his father surprises him, by giving him one on Christmas morning.

One of my pastor colleagues told me once it's the worst Christmas movie ever, because as she put it, it's just about a kid wanting a toy. She said it's about the worst of what Christmas has become. And I guess she's not wrong, if you look at it that way.

But if you see it from the father's perspective, it takes on a whole different meaning. Because while yes, it depicts a Christmas morning characterized by what the narrator calls "unbridled avarice," it is also a story about a parent's love for his child. In granting his son's Christmas wish, "the Old Man" does something that may not have exhibited the best judgment, but which was an expression of deep and abiding love for his son. And to me, that sounds an awful lot like what God has done for us.

God shed the power and privilege of being God to enter the world as one of us; as a tiny, vulnerable child. God embraced our weakness and our finitude to bear unconditional love into this broken, hurting world so desperate and so hungry for it. Some could even argue that it was an exhibition of divine poor judgment. But it was a selfless gift of love and because of that gift, we have hope, peace, joy, and eternal life. And that is something we should celebrate.

You see, when you cut through all the sales and decorations and television specials, Christmas is about God's deep and abiding love for you and for me; love that is not even predicated on our loving God back. Love that is characterized by vulnerability; that takes risks and makes sacrifices. God doesn't come into the world as a powerful conqueror, not in the traditional sense, anyway. God could have chosen to come as Caesar or Pharaoh or Alexander the Great, but God didn't do that. Instead God chose to enter the world as an infant, perhaps the least powerful thing there is. Babies are small, and their muscles don't all quite work yet, and they can't even hold their own heads up. They can't feed themselves or take care of themselves and are totally dependent on adults. All of the things we know God is - infinite, all-powerful, all-knowing - an infant is exactly the opposite.

Giving up divine power to enter the world as a helpless child was not a smart thing to do. But at the same time, it was an act of genius.

You see in the Christ-child, God was not completely powerless. Presbyterian pastor and author Frederick Buechner writes that:

*"Like any child, Jesus has one power only and that is the power to love and [to] be loved which is of all powers, the most powerful because [love] alone can conquer the human heart; at the same time, it is the most powerless, because [love] can do nothing except by consent."<sup>6</sup>*

The great power of Christ is to be the living embodiment of God's love that has no limits, and which cannot be earned. Yet as deep and wide as is God's love for you and me, God never compels us to accept that love or to be affected by it. Which is a great risk. But it is also a bold stroke of genius. You see someone with power can force you to obey and the exercise of that power can chafe those who are subject to it.

But love is different. Love can sway us. Love can strike a chord within us that changes us. Love can inspire devotion. Love can move us to care and to act. When we know that we are loved, we are inspired to love others; to work for the betterment of other people. In the knowledge that we are loved, we find peace, fulfillment, self-worth. And if we can see and experience what God sees in us, that can inspire us to see others as God does, too. That is the genius of God's great

gift. And when that gift inspires compassion and charity and love shared freely with others, the genius of God's gift is on full display. At Christmas, we acknowledge that Gift, and we celebrate its giver, with joy and thanksgiving.

So, enjoy your Christmas lights, your trees and greenery, sing carols as loud as you can, and give presents to the people you love. Enjoy all the things that make Christmas so special. But let all you do to celebrate this season be done in honor of and thanksgiving for God's greatest gift, given to us that first Christmas; the gift of abiding love and eternal life in Christ Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.

To God be all glory, honor, power and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

### End Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Sedaris, David. "Six to Eight Black Men." *Esquire*, 1 Dec. 2002, pp. 96–100, [classic.esquire.com/article/2002/12/1/six-to-eight-black-men](http://classic.esquire.com/article/2002/12/1/six-to-eight-black-men).

<sup>2</sup> "How the Puritans Banned Christmas." *New England Today*, 19 Dec. 2019, [newengland.com/today/living/new-england-history/how-the-puritans-banned-christmas](http://newengland.com/today/living/new-england-history/how-the-puritans-banned-christmas).

<sup>3</sup> Saad, By Lydia. "What Percentage of Americans Celebrate Christmas?" *Gallup.com*, 23 Nov. 2020, [news.gallup.com/poll/272357/percentage-americans-celebrate-christmas.aspx](http://news.gallup.com/poll/272357/percentage-americans-celebrate-christmas.aspx).

<sup>4</sup> Schulz, Charles M. *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. United Features Syndicate/Columbia Broadcasting Company, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> Shepherd, Jean. *A Christmas Story*. Performance by Peter Billingsley, et al., MGM/UA Entertainment Co., 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Buechner, Frederick. *The Faces of Jesus: A Life Story*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2005. 19. Print.