

Christmas Gifts

John 1:1-14
December 26, 2021

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

Last Sunday we had our children and youth tell the Christmas story through their pageant. Today, we have the Apostle John telling the Christmas story through his description of that blessed Gospel event. Can you imagine a children's-and-youth Christmas pageant based on the Gospel According to John that we just heard? John doesn't tell about the expectant parents journeying to Bethlehem. There are no shepherds or angels. No wisemen traveling from afar. There's not even a baby lying in a manger! Instead, John tells of the power and glory of the Word. "In the beginning was the Word," says John, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," bringing light into a darkened world.

How do you stage a pageant based on that?!? Well, there is a little action you could stage, complete with props – or rather, prop. The only prop needed is a single candle. The sanctuary would be bare – no decorations. Just imagine it. Erase from your mind's eye these two trees and all the greenery. No red bows or plants or anything. This chancel area up here would be stripped of all furniture and decorations. The only thing visible would be a small, insignificant table. On that humble table would sit a single, unlit candle. The worshipers would come in and be seated. And sit and sit, for a very long time, silent. They would sit long enough to begin feeling uneasy at the silence – and maybe even a little scared of the dark; your childhood fears bubbling up in your memory. At long last, someone moves slowly down the aisle and, without a word, lights that single candle. The darkness is pierced, shoved back by the one thing that has power to push all darkness back: the light. And that would be that. There you sit in utter darkness watching the candlelight dance through the shadows, remembering John's description when he said, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Just one little flame, and no amount of darkness can make that candlelight retreat one inch!

That is the Gospel According to John. That is the gift of Christmas, a gift that gives rise to all the other gifts of the Christmas story. It is Jesus-the light of the world- who gives rise to the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph, the resourcefulness of the innkeeper, the awe and wonder of the shepherds, the gifts of the wisemen, and the joy in our hearts as we gaze upon a little baby.

This morning, we're going to look at each of these gifts Jesus brings and contemplate ways of sharing them with one another. The first gift is the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph. When we look upon the faithfulness of Mary and Joseph and how they stayed true to God and to one another, we are inspired to be faithful and loving with one another. And just as God rewarded their faithfulness with the blessing of holding Jesus in their arms, we are blessed to hold Jesus in our hearts and to share that gift with one another.

The second gift of Christmas is resourcefulness, the resourcefulness of the inn keeper. Like us, the innkeeper had only so much to give. And on that night, he had no more room. But the innkeeper found a way. When called upon to serve, the innkeeper did what he could, pointing them to safety and comfort and the manger.

We, too, are often faced with doing more than we think we can especially around the holidays. In those moments, if you think back to the innkeeper, you just might find a way to make things work, to help the best you can. That's all God asks of us, and that's a gift we can give to one another – a willing heart and the gift of resourcefulness.

Next, we have the gift of the shepherds. The shepherds brought to the Christ child a very precious gift – the gift of wonder and awe. These were just ordinary folks going about their ordinary work when God broke through with something special – the birth of Jesus.

We all can discover the gift of wonder and awe even as we go about our ordinary lives. By tuning our hearts to God and pausing to contemplate what God is doing, we can encounter and share moments of wonder and awe, moments that remind us and others that all is well, that God is with us. What a gift that is, particularly in our rushed and overscheduled world.

After the shepherds, we have the wisemen. Each of the wisemen give the best of what they have, the gift of excellence, sharing their time, talents and treasures. The time they took to follow the star, the skill they used to cross the desert, the treasures they brought to give – these were not the leftovers but rather the best they had to give.

Through this act of giving, the wisemen were blessed with wisdom and guidance, as well as spiritual and material wealth. So we, too, receive from the Lord guidance and blessing, provision and wellbeing when we give our best in service to God and neighbor.

Finally, we have the greatest gift of all – the baby Jesus and the joy he brings. Over and over again in the scripture about Christmas, we come across the word “joy.” The angel proclaims it most famously, saying, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be for all people.”

In a world crying out amid confusion, pain and brokenness, the baby Jesus brings the gift of wisdom, comfort, and healing, and all the joy it brings. This means that, at our worst moments in life, we can still find joy, the joy of in knowing that God sent Jesus to live among us, to grow as one of us, and to overcome anything and everything faced by any of us. That's the gift of an inner sense of joy, a gift that we can hold onto for ourselves and share with one another, whenever we're faced with confusion, pain and brokenness.

Those are the true gifts of Christmas – the gifts of faithfulness, resourcefulness, wonder and awe, excellence, and joy.

These gifts are available to us and everyone because Jesus was given for us and for all people. Through Jesus and the Christmas miracle, we are connected to one another – and to God.

As John tells us, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” As long as we focus on the light of Christ that shines in every heart, and embrace each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, then we will always have the true gifts of Christmas to share with one another – the gifts of Mary and Joseph and their faithfulness, the innkeeper’s resourcefulness, the shepherds’ wonder and awe, the wisemen’s excellence, and the joy of gazing upon Jesus, always and forever. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and sovereign God, you are God with us. We have known your presence among us as we eagerly awaited the birth of your son.

We know you remain with us because you sent him not to condemn, but to redeem us.

The prophet Isaiah says, “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.”

We know this to be the wondrous miracle we celebrate today – the birth of the Christ child – who is the light, the true light of the world.

It is our hope that the light of the candle representing your presence in the world would reach deep into the lives of those who are in a time of darkness.

Comfort those whose hearts are aching, those who grieve, and those in need of healing and restoration. Comfort, too, those who struggle to find joy in this season. Fill them with the reassurance that the darkness cannot overcome the power of your light.

We pray in the name of your Son, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**