Unwrapping the Gift

A sermon by

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. ***8*** *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.* ***9*** *And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.* ***10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12*** *And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.* ***13*** *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,* ***14*** *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men*Luke 2:8-14

In December of 2005, I gave leadership to a collaboration of community based nonprofit organizations that provided services to families. We had 22 families we were working with that month, and we had a campaign to make sure that everyone living in the households of these 22 families would receive Christmas gifts. We found out what the kids wanted and within reason we got the kids what they wanted, and we gave their parents a $100 gift card to Wal-Mart.

We had donations from our collaborating agencies and friends in the community and we worked diligently to make sure that everyone got a gift. The week before Christmas my office was not a working office because we had gifts piled from floor to ceiling filling up the whole office. That year, like this year, Christmas was on Sunday, and we wanted to make sure that everyone received his or her gifts on Friday. On Friday we spent the day delivering packages to our families and at the end of the day there was one gift left in the office with no nametag on it.

My assistant said she did not know to whom that gift was for. We did not know if it was for a child, or a man or a woman. We did not know if it was for a small child or a teenager. We did not know if it was a gift for a boy or a girl; an infant; a toddler; an elementary aged child; or a teenager. We looked at the Christmas wrapping to see if that would give us a clue. We shook it to see if we could tell what was inside and that might give us a clue. We checked and double-checked our donation list, and everything seemed to be covered.

We finally concluded that the only way to possibly know what was in the package was to unwrap the gift. My assistant carefully unwrapped the package trying not to damage the Christmas paper. Immediately, she recognized the gift and knew to whom it was supposed to go to. She named the teenaged boy as she carefully wrapped the gift back up and I made an evening run to the boy’s home to get him his Christmas gift. That would not have happened if we had not unwrapped the gift.

Every year believers in Jesus Christ take time to unwrap the gift that God has given us in Jesus Christ. Believers around the world, during this time of year, are simply unwrapping the story of Jesus being born in a manger in Bethlehem so we can remember how much God loves us. My sermon today is an unwrapping of the story. So, I invite you today to hear about the gift.

The angels announced that they were bringing tidings of great joy. Joy is the substance of the gift that was being offered to the shepherds, but they were told that this joy was not just for them: The joy is for all people. Today, when we speak of joy, we typically think of good outcomes following successful activities or leisurely experiences. Joy is thought of as the pleasant rewards that come from someone making a good decision. I wonder, can someone have joy when they have made some not- so-wise decisions, or when life has placed them in troublesome circumstances. More directly I ask, can men on Death Row experience joy? Does joy work behind incarceration’s walls, bars, gates, fences, and correctional officers. Perhaps, if the good life offered by the angels reaches men on Death Row, then it is available to all who will receive it.

The Gospel of Luke stands alone in its depiction of the birth of the Christ child. Luke, chapter 2 is the most familiar narrative used to recall the nativity setting. This account is beloved and even memorized by some Christians as they recall the events of the original Christmas day. Luke unwrapped the joyous gift of the baby Jesus born in a manger, and we today unwrap the joyous gift of Christ as we retell the story that Luke puts in front of us. Today we will focus on the joy the angel brought to the shepherd that were watching their sheep the night Christ was born.

Luke’s gospel is fundamentally linked around the theme of joy to all via a gift of God. This gift is no meager contribution; no token expression; nor no buddy exchange. The gift is joy! The first question then is, what is joy?

Joy is the awareness that in some way life has smiled on you. Smiling on you with kindness to bless you. Joy takes on special significance when you are aware that God is smiling on you. This gift is God’s best. We understand that joy is God giving us God. There is a lesson within this definition that contends that whenever you truly give yourself to someone else, you are giving the very best that you must give.

There are four aspects of this gift that I want to underscore in the message today. Walk with me around the text as we unwrap what the Angel said to the Shepherds.

The first notation in the text is that the gift mentioned to the Shepherds was directed. The text says, “unto you”. This tells us that the angels were declaring that God sees and knows people for who they are. For unto you lets us know that God saw and understood the Shepherds. This is significant because Shepherds were often under the radar because their occupation was a despised occupation. Although the reference to shepherds evokes a positive, pastoral image for the modern reader, but in the first century, shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on other people’s lands.

Luke uses the lowly shepherd as the one that the angels come to and declared, “unto you”. The direction of the gift was to those who would often be considered left out. The “unto you” proclamation was not made to the political leaders, or to the religious hierarchy. When we read the full text, it tells us that August was Caesar of the Roman Empire, but Caesar did not get the announcement. The text tells us that Cyrenius was the Governor of Syria, but Cyrenius did not get the announcement. We understand that Jerusalem was the religious capitol of the region at that time, but the High Priest of Jerusalem did not get a notification of the gift. The gift came to those that Howard Thurman would call the “Disinherited”. In a unique way men on death row are the disinherited. You have been left behind and left out. You have been seen as undeserving and worthless. The good news that I bring today is that the gift of God’s joy in the Savior Jesus Christ is directed especially to you!

Just as the message went out to the disinherited shepherds, the message goes out to those who have been disinherited today by a society that has stated in public record that you should die. Somebody here needs to hear that the gift of God’s joy is directed toward YOU!

So often we start looking for God’s gift to come for and through somebody else. But you must understand that what God has for you is going to come to you. You might think you are from a poor background, or that you are not well connected to powerful people, or that you don’t have the right upbringing to have the blessing of God, but know this, the gift of God’s joy is expressly directed to you.

The second notation about the gift is that it is dated. The text says, “unto you is born this day”. This tells us that the gift of joy is a present-day blessing to the era that you live in. Joy is not just for those of yesterday nor is it only for a future end-time event. No! You can experience joy today!

The shepherds lived day-to-day and understood the concept of their provisions being met daily. In that day shepherds moved day-to-day based on where they could find pastures that they could lead their sheep on to feed. To the shepherd each day had both challenges and opportunities in which they had to navigate for themselves and for their herd. They found themselves sometimes in fields with little to eat and they had to lead the sheep to the most generous places to get something to eat. The shepherd and the sheep relied on the daily provisions for their very survival. Living day by day did not allow for a lot of future planning and speculations.

The truth that the Jewish tradition understood about God’s promised Messiah was that the Messiah was always coming in the potential of the future. The anticipated Messiah was always coming at a date yet to come, and yet to be determined. They expected the Messiah to be a coming new King; or a future renowned prophet; or a new military commander; or a national social revolutionary. To the Jews the Messiah was always arriving futuristically.

The angel announced that the blessing of the messiah was for today and that the longed awaited promise was here. The Angel said, “this day”. They told the Shepherd that fear was suspended today, and that good news is pronounced today. Today, great joy is available, and everybody is to be a recipient. And it all is happening, not in the future, but today!

The danger of the religious walk is that religious people often live in anticipation of the promised tomorrow and never realize the gifts that God gives them today. The followers of Moses in the desert were always looking for the Promised Land. Abraham and all who followed him hold on to the promise that faithful allegiance and compliance will lead to a life of rewards from a God will keeps promises. Much of the Deuteronomist teachings have to do with a linear thinking that suggest if you do one thing you will get a second promised outcome. Do A (live right) and you will get B (a godly promised outcome). One danger in this religious thinking is that the religious person can be overly concerned with the process of getting to B that they miss the joy of living in the present. We are aware of that God promises our future, and we, become so focused on that future date that we stop seeing what God is doing today.

Sometimes you ought to just stop and count the gifts God has given you for today. Men on Death Row, the gift of God is for you to experience today. Joy is available today. You do not have to wait for Christmas or any holy holiday. You can experience it today. You don’t have to wait for Sabbath or Sunday. You can experience it today. You don’t have to wait for a Governors clemency, a presidential pardon, an Innocence Project, or a culture that rejects corporal punishment. Finally, you don’t have to wait to die to experience the joy of Jesus. The gift is available today. Somebody should say hallelujah!

The gift was in the City of David. The significance to the City of David reference is that God’s joyous gift is connected to community. God’s gift did not occur on a deserted island for just you. It did not occur on a family farm where you and your immediate family are the only ones to be impacted. This joyous gift of the Christ child was in the City of David where community is encountered regularly. I think this is telling us that the good news is not for you to harbor for yourself. While joy is to you, it is not just for you.

God’s gift of joy is to be shared with others that you meet. Joy has a communicable benefit. We all know about communicable diseases spread from person to person, like influenza, measles, mumps, or even HIV. These are all detrimental diseases that can be spread from person to person if you don’t take precautions. Well, joy is beneficially communicable. Joy adds when those who have it pass it on to others that they come in social contact with. Joy is contagious.

The reference to the City of David tells us that the gift to you that you receive today is to be diffused. That is that it is to be spread to others that we encounter. Diffuse means: spread or cause to spread over a wide area or among a larger number of people: To become widely dispersed; spread out. The gift of joy is to be spread out in the community that God gives you.

I looked up the definition of Diffusion and it said: “the process whereby particles of liquids, gases, or solids intermingle as the result of their spontaneous movement caused by thermal agitation and in dissolved substances move from a region of higher to one of lower concentration.” - That was a mouthful. Let me see if I can make this plain: Has anybody ever made Kool-Aid? Diffusion is like Kool-Aid mixed in water. The gift of joy we have received in Jesus Christ is to be diffused in the community the way that Kool-Aid is diffused in a picture of water.

The angel declared to the shepherds that the gift is a person that has saving power, which is Christ, the Divine Promised One. To be Divinity the gift must have certain attributes that only the Divine has. The Christ gift is eternal – The babe is born in that current era, but the Christ lives forever. The babe is born in the limited space of a manger in Bethlehem, but the Christ rules in a Kingdom that has no boundaries. The babe is born dependent on human care, but the Christ would ultimately provide care for all humanity.

Let me end this message by going back to the wrapped gift I took to that boy in 2005. The boy was appreciative and overjoyed because he did not expect to get much of anything for Christmas that year. The boy’s mother started crying; first with tears of joy, and then with tears of regret because she felt she had not been a good mother to her son.

This mother had a history of drug abuse, bad relationships, and poor decisions. She started saying that she did not deserve the Wal-Mart gift card because she had made a lot of mistakes. She said I should give it to someone else. This was my cue to unwrap the true meaning of Christmas with this mother.

I told her that Christ came for all of us when we did not deserve it. I told her that Christ came when we did not earn it. I told her that Christ came when we should have been left out. I told her that her task that evening was to receive the gift card, but more than that to receive the joy of Jesus Christ that has been made a gift to her via the babe born in a manger.

Today, the same task is placed in front of you here on Death Row – receive the gift of the joy of Jesus Christ into your heart.