

# The Gift

## Luke 2:1-15

December 24, 2007  
Rev. Chris Cadenhead

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What is the best gift you have ever received? Was it the bicycle you got for Christmas when you were 8, or the cell phone you got last year with an Elvis Presley ring tone? I have been the recipient of many wonderful gifts, all expressions of the generosity of friends and family. But among the most valuable gifts I have ever received is something that wasn't a Christmas gift or a birthday present. In fact, it was a gift I did not expect and had never even thought to ask for.

In 1991, between my sophomore and junior years at college, I took a summer job with my home church working as a counselor in a summer day camp program. As the summer drew to a close, my father, who was the pastor of the church, invited me to preach at a Sunday night service. It was the first sermon I ever preached. I don't think it was an especially good sermon. I don't even remember what it was about.

What I do remember is that several weeks later I was back at school, when one day a package arrived in my campus mailbox. It was a big manila envelope with something solid and rectangular inside. The return address told me it was from home, but the package was too small to be food and not big enough to be the sweater my mom sent every fall to keep me warm when the winter came. I ripped open the envelope to find a Bible inside. That was a bit strange, because I knew that my parents knew I already had a Bible. Besides, I could tell from looking at this Bible that it wasn't new. The cover and the binding already showed signs of use.

Accompanying the Bible was a letter from my father, a letter that I still have clipped to the inside cover. The letter reads in part:

*Dear Chris:*

*Since your sermon last month I have searched for an appropriate response. Certainly, a job that was well done deserves a response. I wanted to give you something but wanted it to be more than just something I ran out and bought. I, rather, wanted it to be something that was a part of me.*

*I decided that I would like for you to have my Bible. It is the version that I have been preaching from for the last six months. I hope you will find some meaning in my choosing to give it to you.*

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*Sincerely,*

*Dad*

Now, you are probably not surprised to hear that as a preacher I have multiple copies of the Scriptures. Compared to some of the features those versions possess, this one is nothing fancy. It has no study aids, no footnotes, and very little in the way of reference tools – just the words of Scripture with a short concordance and some maps stuck in the back. And yet, this is the copy of the Bible that I still read from and preach from today, sixteen years later. The reason is at least partly obvious. This gift is an expression of the kind of affirmation and blessing that every child longs to receive from a parent. If you have children, tell them you are proud of them. They may not know how to say it, but it will mean more to them than any gift under the tree with their name on it.

But another reason I still hold on to this Bible and this letter is that one little phrase my dad used – *I wanted [this gift] to be something that was a part of me*, he said. Now, when you are 20 years old and in college, there are a lot of things you can think of that you want your parents to give you – a new car, a new video game system like the one the guy down the hall has, or maybe even just cold hard cash. But this gift – a gift that is an extension of my father’s very self – I never thought to ask for that, never even knew that I wanted or needed that. Until it was given, and now I cannot imagine my life without it. And I am not talking about this Bible when I say that. I am talking about the gift of my father himself being shared with me.

That is why we are here tonight.

Down throughout the ages, God’s people had asked for many things from him; for deliverance from slavery, for food in the wilderness, for rain in a famine, for the defeat of an enemy, for the healing of disease. Some had even dared to ask God for a sign of his presence. “Show me your glory,” Moses had asked of the Lord. And in his own time and his own way, God had granted such requests. After all, God is a giver by his very nature. From the moment God first chose to create a world and then give it to us to enjoy, our Lord has shown us that He is at his very best when he is giving gifts to his children.

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But despite everything that God had given, nobody had ever thought to ask for the gift that was given one night in a little place called Bethlehem. When a new born baby cried out into the damp night air, God was offering to his battered world something that we didn't know we wanted or needed. Even though it is the one thing we simply cannot do without.

Sure, God's people had waited for a long time for Messiah to come. Hundreds of years earlier, the prophets had promised that God would raise up his anointed one to come and redeem his people, to set things straight, to clean up the mess that was occupied Israel. And though many years – centuries even – had passed, the people had not stopped asking for that to happen. Well, maybe some had. Some had likely just accepted and settled into the oppressive routine of life and forgotten about those ancient promises. But there had never ceased in Israel to be a voice crying out for God to act. “O come, O come, Emmanuel,” we sing in this season, echoing a prayer that first began to ring out thousands of years ago.

But when the people made that request, no one in their wildest dreams had ever imagined the manner in which God would answer it. Not here. Not now. Not like this. Bethlehem was a sleepy little village like all the other sleepy little villages that dotted the landscape. And other than a few government bean counters sent to take a census, nothing of importance was happening there. Mary and Joseph were just peasants eking out a meager existence. And other than the fact that Joseph could claim some distant family linkage to King David – as I am sure thousands of others could in that day – there was nothing about them to suggest they were any different from any other poor peasants eking out a meager existence. Besides all that, Mary and Joseph had come to Bethlehem because of a decree sent out by the mighty Augustus – just another sign that Caesar and not Yahweh was in control of things. Or so Rome thought.

But as unexpected as it was that these would be the circumstances under which God would give his long awaited gift, even more unexpected was the gift itself. Nobody had ever expected that when they asked God to send the Messiah he would respond by sending Himself. The knew the Messiah would be sent by God, anointed by God, led by God, empowered by God. Nobody knew that he would actually be God – God in the flesh, God walking around among us, God earning a day's wages as a laborer in the carpenter's shop, God learning to recite the psalms

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and the prayers the rabbis taught, God experiencing our hunger and our tiredness, God dancing at a wedding party, God going to a funeral and weeping, God dying as a criminal.

It was too much to ask. Actually, that doesn't really capture it. It was too much to even know that it could be asked for. God was righteous and pure and holy – so holy that pious Jewish lips would dare not even utter his name. And yet here this God was, staring back at us from a makeshift crib all wrapped up in some dirty rags.

It was the kind of gift nobody ever knew they wanted or needed. It was not a gift from God. It is the gift of God, the very fullness of God himself, his presence to us and among us. And we are here tonight because now that we have known the thrill of receiving this gift we cannot imagine our lives without it.

Now, the thing about a gift like that is that it usually ends up sending you in some directions you hadn't planned on traveling. Before I received this Bible from my father, I had entertained a thought or two about vocational ministry, but mostly thought I would do something else with my life. And I can't tell you that standing there in that campus post office I suddenly saw a burning bush and knew with certainty that I would become a preacher. I can tell that from that point on I never could quite get away from the possibility of it. It's as though, whether he knew it or not when Dad gave me this gift he was showing me that something or someOne bigger than me had a claim on life. (Even though years later when I finally decided to go to seminary my dad jokingly lamented that he had always hoped I would get real job.)

Well, on the night God gave us the gift of himself, he knew full well the kind of claim he was making on us. Even though we would reject him and despise him because he wasn't what we thought he would be, there could be no getting around this gift. In fact, the eternal outcome of the world and all who live in it would depend on how we receive it.

But for tonight at least, we are here just to marvel at the gift, to stand in awe of the gift, to bow with the humble shepherds in praise and adoration of the gift, to receive the gift with all the joy our feeble hearts and minds can muster. For the invisible God who is without end and without beginning has put on our flesh and entered into our time-bound lives, that we might be with him, just as he has come to be with us.

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*“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” (Hebrews 1:1)*

*“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” (Ephesians 1: 22-23)*

*“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” (Hebrews 1:3)*

*“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)*

*“And this will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” (Luke 2:12)*

What a gift! Amen.