

"The Gift"

A Sunday school teacher asked her kindergarteners to draw a picture of the manger scene at Bethlehem. In the corner of one student's sketch was a very plump, jolly-looking fellow. The teacher, pointing to the portly character asked, "Tell me about this person?" "Oh," the young pupil said, "that's Round John Virgin."

I think you will agree that some people get confused about what we're celebrating, why we're celebrating it, and who should be the focus of our celebration. We have put so many things out there with antlers and chimneys – you know what I mean – instead of a stable. Amazingly, this year it has been different. I don't know about you – but I have been hearing that word more and more and more. The word is the day we are celebrating – Christmas! It is such a blessing. Jesus should be the focus of our celebration. We are reflecting tonight on the true meaning of Christmas.

The angels delivered a message to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth, and we learn what Christmas is all about - God sending His Son to earth. This wasn't man's idea, it was God's idea from the very beginning. Christmas wasn't humanity's initiative, it was God's initiative. Christmas came about because of God. Tonight, let's try to think about the reasons why God did what He did at Christmas.

God wanted to embrace us with His love – the angel said I bring you "*Good News that will be to all the people.*" There are a whole lot of people who could use some good news: those who feel lonely and unloved, isolated and un-forgiven, even unimportant. One poll says that one out of five Americans say that life is meaningless. That is sad!

People do get lonely. We all do from time to time. As a matter of fact, the renowned Albert Einstein once said, "It's strange to be known so universally and yet be so personally lonely." But we are not alone; we can never be alone if we know Jesus Christ. St. Augustine had the right idea to zero in on John 3:16 when he said, "*He loves each one of us, as if there were only one of us.*" That is how personal His love for us is.

Through sending His Son, God has fully demonstrated His love for us. The Apostle Paul got it right when he wrote to the Romans: "*But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*" (Romans 5:8) Because of Jesus Christ's sacrifice for us on the cross, we can, through faith in Him, enter into a loving relationship with Almighty God that is everlasting. It has no expiration date! "*I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:38-39) Isn't that the truth!

God wants to comfort us, and He has the angels say, "*Do not be afraid.*" The shepherds were fearful because they encountered the "*glory of the Lord.*" Let's stop for a moment and think

what it must have been like that night – when all of a sudden, the heavens opened up. There was this glorious light and this noise of singing. Just recently I saw that there was rocket launched in California and because of atmospheric conditions it looked other worldly – and people freaked out. People were hiding; all sorts of calls to the government; it was wild. Could you imagine if the angels came today? I am in awe – it is just unbelievable.

The shepherd's knees must have been knocking. Why? Because they encountered the glory of the Lord. They were knowing their sinfulness, the shepherds trembled in the presence of God. Jesus came so that we might have peace in our hearts - knowing that in Him, we not only have His love, but we have His forgiveness – and not live in fear of God's judgment and condemnation.

Many today do not believe that salvation comes through Jesus Christ alone. We have heard some say that He is only one of many ways to salvation. The world needs a savior because without one – let's face it - we are lost! Do you believe that you cannot be saved? Do you feel that you are a lost cause – and that you cannot be saved? Jesus Christ will save you. He promised - come to Him as you are – warts and all. I always like to say, "God loves you just the way you are – BUT He loves you too much to leave you that way!" Christ will save you! Listen to these words from Paul's letter to the Romans 5:1 *"Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."* Thank God that He loves us enough to send us a savior – Jesus Christ – His Son!

Christmas came into being because of God's desire to enrich us with His joy - and the angels brought their message with tidings of *"Great joy."* We all have an opportunity to have a relationship with Jesus and He wants to fill us with His joy. Have you ever heard the term – Joy of the Lord? It comes from Him! Jesus said in John 10:10 *"I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly."* What was it that the angels spoke of? Not just of *"joy,"* but of *GREAT joy!*

For centuries God spoke to His people through His prophets promising His Messiah – His anointed One – and in sending Jesus – He kept His promises and He would then fulfill the Scripture - *"In the town of David..."* The angels pointed to Christ's birth fulfilling the Old Testament prophecy of Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem: *"From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity."*

In the Old Testament there are 116 prophecies of the coming of the Messiah, all of them made hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus and fulfilled to the letter in Jesus Christ, the Messiah. George Heron, a French mathematician, calculated that the odds of one man fulfilling only 40 of those prophecies are 1 in 10 to the power of 157. That is a 1 followed by 157 zeros. Compare it to this; the odds of winning the state lottery are 14 followed by 6 zeros.

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2017, Year B

In the Old Testament, the prophecy becomes clear and a single stream flows to this ultimate climax when God said, I reveal myself to some at this level, some at this level, and some at this level - until the prophetic revelation of God comes to its fulfillment in the sending of His Only Son, Jesus Christ. Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem in order that the prophecy might be fulfilled, and there, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the Messiah was born.

In sending His Son to earth, it was God's design that Christ would: provide our Salvation - "*A Savior has been born.*" It has been said that if our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior. That is what Jesus did for us. He died so that we might live. His death on the cross paid the price for our sins – with the only strings attached being that we believe in Him.

It is very important that we remember just who Jesus is. He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords – and He left His throne in heaven to become a baby – BUT that does not make Him any less the King of creation! The angels proclaimed, "*He is Christ, the Lord.*" Christ is the Greek form of the word Messiah – or anointed One. At sound of His Kingly Name which is above every name, "*every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord*" (Philippians 2:10-11)

One very important thing for us to remember is that Christmas happened because God decided to come as a man - as "*a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.*" God came to walk among us so that He might wrap His arms around us. Hebrews 4:14 -16 reminds us "*we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.*" God spoke to us through His angels who said – "*And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger.*"

The Lord spoke through the Prophet Jeremiah saying: "*And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. And I will be found by you*" (Jeremiah 29:13-14) Our Lord Jesus Christ made it crystal clear as He told us who He is – and why He came. On the night before He died – He said this: "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6) Jesus is the only way in which we can make a connection with God. That's why He came on that first Christmas night, and that is what Christmas is all about.

We rejoice tonight the fact that God loves us so very much that He came to us – He left His throne and became a dependent baby – relying on His earthly parents to care for His every need. We all know how babies are! The King of the universe became one of us – so that He

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2017, Year B

could become the true “*Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*” (John 1:29) May we humbly receive the Gift that He has given us this Christmas – the gift of eternal life with Him.