

Sermon for Christmas Eve 2020 by Pastor Hanberry "The Good News Gift That Keeps On Giving" Tucc (Ser20-50) Scriptures: Isaiah 62:6-12; Ps 97; Titus 3:4-7; & Luke 2:1-20

Many of us know the writings of C. S. Lewis: The author of the "Chronicles of Narnia" for children, the wonderful "Screwtape Letters". We also know C. S. Lewis as the man whose heart was melted by a North American woman in the movie, "Shadowlands."

I don't think you could say that C. S. Lewis was particularly crabby or unhappy, but I ran across a crabby essay titled "What Christmas Means to Me" that Lewis wrote that sounds almost like Mr. Scrooge, himself, could have written it. Or perhaps by one of us, given the struggles of our lives in these days.

In this essay, C. S. Lewis describes Christmas as a "commercial racket". He says, "The problem with commercialized Christmas began with Charles Dickens' Mr. Pickwick carrying a cod to Dingley Dell as an offering for their Yuletide celebration. Then it was Scrooge ordering a turkey for his clerk. "But then the idea that not only all friends but even all acquaintances should give one another presents, or at least send one another cards," a tradition, says Lewis, "forced upon us by the shopkeepers."

And the worst of it is the giving of gifts by people one hardly knows. The "whole thing is a nightmare," says Lewis. "Most of it is involuntary. The modern rule is that anyone can force you to give him a present by sending you a quite unprovoked present of his own. It is almost a blackmail. Who has not heard the wail of despair, and indeed of resentment, when, at the last moment, just as everyone hoped that the nuisance was over for one more year, the unwanted gift from Mrs. Busy (whom we hardly remember) flops unwelcomed through the letter-box, and back to the dreadful shops one of has to go."

Not stopping there, C. S. Lewis continues his Yuletide complaint: "Things are given as presents which no mortal ever bought for himself - gaudy and

useless gadgets, 'novelties' because no one was ever fool enough to make their like before. Have we really no better use for materials and for human skill and time than to spend them on all this rubbish?"

"And the nuisance! If worst comes to worst I'd sooner give [the shopkeepers] money for nothing and write it off as a charity if Christmas is needed to keep the economy afloat." So says Lewis.

He's got to be joking. Or maybe this is just strong satire. For as one writer puts it, "there's more to Christmas than the gifts, particularly more than the gifts from folk whom we do not know or like sending us things we neither want nor need."

Remember that tie we received from Aunt Agnes, and that ashtray in the shape of Florida sent by someone named John?

Lewis then asks: "What is the point of getting a gift we did not want, a gift we did not need from someone whom we hardly know?" But let me say, "perhaps it is the whole point of this blessed day of days." Maybe C. S. Lewis was a little off the mark in his crabby essay. Did you hear the Scripture?

"Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11).

As I see it, "God kept trying, with every means at God's disposal, to get through to us - the covenant to Abraham and Sarah, the promises to the patriarchs, the poetry of the prophets, the praise of the psalms. When none of this worked, then God gave us the Son. Down through the centuries thousands had begged God for a sign, a word, a signal, but who had asked for the Son, the very Son of God "the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being" (Heb 1:3)? The angel said to us, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:12). But what kind of sign?

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a parent's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

The word "grace" is such a beautiful word. "In the New Testament "grace" means gift. "He was full of grace," says John. "He was, in his being, full of the grace of God, the gift of God," the gift that just keeps on giving. Yet John also tells the tough truth that, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him" (Jn 1:11). And who could blame them? "Who had really asked for this much God, all bundled up in one person. God standing there face-to-face, in the flesh, unavoidable, speaking words simple and direct, pointing" us to a way that we might rather evade, pointing us to be a gift in which God wants us to participate.

In this past nine months of Pandemic much of the world as we know it has been saying "we need God. We want more than ever to see a sign that God is really part of our anxious and shattered lives. We cry out for a voice, "Show us your glory!" We cry, "and we shall be satisfied."

But do we really mean it? Or is it just in times of anxiety and tragedy that we say, much less mean it? Do we mean it when we get the one called Jesus, the one who reveals a new image of God, in the flesh, standing face-to-face in front of us, pointing the way. The way can be so very narrow that few want to walk it. So, though he is grace, a gift, a gift that keeps on giving, will we, as John says, "receive" him. He was thrust into our mailbox one starlit night in Bethlehem, God's great gift, "yet the world did not know him," "his own people did not accept him." So, will we receive him this night?

And yet, says John, to those who had the courage, or the imagination (I don't know which virtue is more important) to receive this gratuitous gift, "he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:12). To those who were open to the reception of a gift we did not want, from a God we hardly even knew, "he gave power."

"Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days God has spoken to us by a baby" (Heb 1:1-2a).

In spite of all the bad news we might hear about or even experience ourselves, this is the good news tonight: And the angel said, "Don't be afraid. This is good news, a sign that God really cares for you. You shall find a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger...Jesus, the gift of a lifetime.

May each of you here tonight be the gift that keeps on giving to the world around you. "Amen and Merry Christmas!!!