

Christmas Is About Receiving

Titus 3:3-5, John 1:10-12

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

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We try to teach our children that the true meaning of Christmas is giving, but we know it's not exactly true. Christmas is not about the gifts we give one another. Christmas is about the gift God gave to us. Christmas is about receiving.

We wouldn't have these glorious songs, the decorations, the joy in our hearts, if the whole point is that we have to give presents. The merchants and advertisers want us to *think* that, reducing the holiday to the horizontal. If Christmas were about the duty of giving it would be as exciting as a stewardship drive. But Christmas is exuberant, because it is a celebration of this gift we see lying in a manger: the love of God become small and weak for our sake, the eternal Word become flesh for us. We are joyful because we hear the same message that the shepherds heard: "Unto you is born this day a Savior, which is Christ the Lord!"

The first word to us is that we have someone to *save* us. Titus 3:3-5 (NLT) reminds us: "Once we, too, were foolish and disobedient. We were misled and became slaves to many lusts and pleasures. Our lives were full of evil and envy, and we hated each other. But when God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

Christmas is about receiving that gift. Christmas is not about how generous we are, but about how needy we are. This meal that is set before us puts us in the proper relation to Christ—as people who are hungry and thirsty, people who are ready to receive him. The prologue to the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus "came to his own, but his own people did not receive him." God gave a gift to the world, and the world said "No thanks." John is telling us that there is always a choice involved, and those who chose to receive the gift of Jesus as Savior received in that act the right to become children of God.

Why would we refuse a gift as precious as Jesus? It may be that the gift is not what we hoped for. We may be like children who receive only clothes for Christmas when they want toys. It may be that we have our minds made up what we want God to do, and he hasn't done it yet. That is the story of the gospels. Jesus' own people rejected him because they wanted a better Messiah than the one they got. They wanted someone to re-establish national dominance and win a war for a change, someone to fix the economy and provide free health care, but instead they got a Messiah who came in weakness and walked with the poor and spoke of peace and dependence on God. What kind of leader is that? What kind of Savior is that? Some of us reject Jesus because he is not the quick fix to all our problems that we want God to be. When we listen closely to him, we hear that he does not endorse our ideology. We cannot train him to do tricks for us. What God offers us instead is a Savior who tells us to deny ourselves, take up a cross, and follow him. No thanks. I'm just looking for a ticket to heaven, not a gift with a lot of strings attached.

Why would we refuse the gift? Some of us don't want to feel obligated. Sometimes we would prefer that certain people *not* give us a gift, because we don't want to feel indebted to them. If someone gives us a small gift, we can return the favor and the power balance stays even. But if someone gives us a very large gift which we cannot match, then the power has shifted. We begin to feel that we owe that person. We cannot go on living our lives as if that other person did not matter. And so it is with God,

when he gives us the incredible gift of Christ. We are in no position to repay the gift, so we cannot accept the gift and continue to shut God out.

Why would we refuse the gift? It may be that we simply feel we don't need anything. I can imagine a wealthy person sitting in a large house on Block Island, looking at his Christmas tree and thinking, "There is not a thing in the world I need. I don't know why I should even go to the trouble of opening these packages." Some of us have never really opened the gift of Jesus because we are not sure that we need it. It is one more thing to clutter up our lives. But the truth of Christmas is that we need a Savior. Whatever arrangements we have made to get through our days, on some level it is still true that without Christ we sit like the shepherds in the cold and the dark, wondering if this life we've chosen is all there is. In that darkness a Christmas angel appears and says, "Rejoice! I have good news for you and for all people! A Savior has been born, the Messiah, and you will find him wrapped in cloths and lying in a feed-trough."

We have to make a choice to receive that as good news, and then we have to make a choice to see for ourselves if it is true. The shepherds went into town to find the baby, and when they found him they knelt down to worship him as their Savior and Lord, their infant King. And so perhaps you too have come today, to see if it is true. Our testimony is: Yes, it is true. It is no fairy tale. It is not a comforting legend but a fact of history. The God who made the world made himself small and lived as a Palestinian peasant, taught us to love God and neighbor, and was executed by the Romans in cahoots with the religious establishment. But then he rose from the dead and took his throne as ruler of the universe. If that kind of love is the source of everything and the goal of everything, it changes the way we see the world. That same Jesus offers his own eternal life to us as a gift: he will put his life in us if we will receive it, if we can believe that God has already forgiven us and wants us to live as his children, under his authority and under his care.

For that reason we gather around this table, which reminds us both of Jesus' birth and his death for our sakes. This table is a way of proclaiming the gospel. It is a way of telling us that we need to receive. When we place the bread on our tongues, when we take a sip from the cup, we are saying to Jesus again, "Yes, I receive you into myself. By this symbolic action I mean that I am taking your life into my body. Thank you. Thank you. Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!"