

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

3 You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

4 For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

5 For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the

Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Sermon: Gifting

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

For those who were able to join us last night for the communion service you'll remember that we learned that the gift of Jesus is not about hope but rather about covenant. This is because of the omniscience of God, the fact that God knows all things.

Everything that is happening now – everywhere. All the kids around the globe who are opening gifts this morning, and all the kids who have no gifts. Old men living alone, and grandma's surrounded by children, the worm in the ground and the sparrow in the air - God knows each and every one of them.

God's knowledge extends way back to the very beginning of time, and most importantly for us this morning, God knows the future as well. To God, past, present, and future are all laid out before him – there are no secrets.

We're familiar with the story of Jesus; each Christmas we hear about Mary and the angel, the shepherds in their fields, the wise men who travelled to meet the infant king. We also know the other end of the story. We know about Easter.

We know that the baby Jesus grew up, and was killed by men. The miracle birth ended in murder. The Great Light, the Prince of Peace, the gift of hope to humanity was killed by the very people he had been sent to save. That puts us in a precarious predicament. We killed our own Saviour. So what now? What does it mean? Are we beyond salvation?

Though we are confused and unsure, God is not. That is because the past, present and future are as one to him. While we are shocked at how the story of Jesus turned out, God knew it all along. God knew what we would do to Jesus, and God sent Jesus anyway. Immanuel – God with us. God saw the terrible thing that we would do, and decided to be with us anyway. This is our surety, this is our foundation. God has committed himself to be with us, despite the worst that we can do.

That's the good news. God has covenanted to be with us forever, to never let us go. Though we may turn our backs on him, he will never turn his back upon us. God is forever faithful.

But we're not. We're not faithful. We have good days, but we're not consistent in the way God is, not the way Jesus is. I think it has something to do with the ways in which we receive and give gifts. The gift of Jesus was well received by some, but even the blessed Mary with the halo later thought Jesus was crazy and tried to have him restrained. We already know what the worst among us tried to do. It would seem that things have not really changed all that much. We still don't do gifts well.

Have you ever given someone a gift that was later re-gifted? You know what that is, when you get something you don't really want, and so you end up giving it to someone so you don't have to buy them a gift? That's the gift that keeps on giving because you can both disrespect the person who gave you the gift and disrespect the person you pass it along to at the same time! Now, there are times when we receive something that we quite like and end up giving to someone who we know will also appreciate it, but that tends to happen more rarely.

There are also gifts that we don't even care about enough to give to someone else, the gifts that we just throw in the corner and never think about again. Oddly enough, the gifts that we throw in the corner when we're younger because they're not what we want are often the essentials that we really need – mittens, socks, underwear – salvation.

The point is, we're often lousy receivers and perhaps that stems from the fact that we're often lousy givers – especially when it comes to giving to people we don't know. Now, a few weeks back Ken spoke about the needy that come to the church through the week, and you responded generously with \$700 worth of Food Basics gift cards – of which more than half are left so we're still able to help going into the new year.

But there are many who worry that the people coming for the gift cards will sell the cards for drugs. If we're honest with ourselves, how many needy people do we turn down, saying to ourselves 'he'd only use the money for booze, or pot, or smokes.' We're afraid that people will abuse the gifts we give them, that they won't use what we give in the way that we intended.

We give, but there are strings attached. When we give with expectation, we are not really letting go of the thing we give; we're still holding on to it. We're not understanding what a gift really is. When we give a gift we are showing another person that they have value. They have value as another human being, as a friend, as a relative. It's a recognition that they are important to us, respected. Debt is too strong a word, but when we truly give a gift we are expressing somehow an appreciation for somebody else's existence.

When we give a gift with conditions - 'you may have this but only if you use it the way I intend' – we are doing the opposite. We demean the other and put them down. We don't respect them. We don't value them.

More than this, not only do we not value the other, we actually seek to have power over them. By giving conditional gifts we seek to put others in our debt, to control them, to change them, make them better, make them the way we think they should be.

So we find that a gift with strings attached is in fact the opposite of a gift. If a gift shows respect and value for the other, and raises the other up by showing our esteem for them, a gift with strings shows disrespect, value for ourselves, and seeks to raise us up by showing our esteem for ourselves and indebting others to us.

We know what Jesus had to say about such giving in Mark – surely we already have any reward we might get from it here on earth because it doesn't count for anything in heaven.

Instead, we might learn something from the way that God gave. God gave us Jesus knowing that some would ignore and reject the gift – throw him in the corner. Some would sell or otherwise pervert the gift. Some would even seek to destroy the gift.

But God did not seek to control us with Jesus. He left us free to receive or reject as we choose, and that reveals something important to me.

When God gives, it is an expression of himself. It is his nature to give. God was complete before the creation of all things and yet he chose to create. He chose to make something outside of himself, and to love it and to nurture it. God, who has no needs of his own, chooses to put effort into the other, and even had to go so far as to make that other himself.

Giving is a character trait of God. It is part of who God is. We are all made in the image of God; we are not God, but we are an image or a reflection. When we give, when we truly give, not expecting earthly reward, our own godly character gets refined. That image comes a little further into focus; we move just a little closer to the ideal that God had in mind when he formed the first Adam out of the mud and breathed his spirit into him.

I don't tithe because the church needs the money. I tithe because it teaches me how to live in trust; it's a way of practicing freedom, of learning not to cling to material things for security. I don't give money to people that ask because I think that they will suddenly turn their lives around. I give because I want to be a person who gives. Even if more than half of the people abuse the gift, I want to live as a giver.

When we live as givers, we plant seeds in other's lives. A few of those seeds will sprout, some will grow strong and bear fruit; it's not up to me to judge who is worthy, who will be the 'good investment.' As Paul writes: I plant, Appollos waters, but it is God who gives the growth.

At this time of year we may be congratulating ourselves on our giving: our opening of our homes to others with Christmas feasts, our giving of gifts to family and friends, our giving of money to the church and charities, our giving to people we meet on the street who need our help.

When we give well, when we give to empower others rather than empowering ourselves, God smiles; his image in us shines a little brighter. But we should never forget that first of all we are beggars. We are the ones in great need of God's gift of a saviour.

We have been given that gift of a Saviour, and we have been given free will. We can choose to ignore the gift, spurn or reject it, talk others out of receiving it, sell it for social standing, or we can receive what God offers to us; we can take it into our heart and life. When we receive the Son, we also become sons and daughters, heirs to the King. Once we are heirs, then we find that we have something of great value to share with others.

This Christmas the gift we have been offered is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Take it. Take the gift and then with Jesus living within us we can join with the angels in declaring

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Amen.