

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 24, 2011
John Crosby
Love That Shows Up: The Unexpected Gift of Jesus
John 1:1-10**

All this autumn we've been talking about a very, very few things. We have been trying to concentrate on those things that will be left for you, or for any of us, when everything is gone. We took our cue from the apostle Paul, who said that in the end only three things will remain—faith and hope and love, and he said the greatest of these is love. So we talked about faith, faith that moves us from one kind of life to another. Then we talked about hope, hope that does more than just get us through hard times, hope that gives us joy in the worst and best of our lives. Then this Advent we started to talk about love. All through this month we have talked about love that shows up unexpectedly. Dan just read the part of the story of God where love shows up unexpectedly, almost unnoticed, and I'd like to continue that story in Matthew to talk about what comes next.

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

I used to think, by the way, that that was because Herod was such a bad king, that when he was mad, everybody was afraid that they were going to be killed. There may be some truth in that, but a friend of mine wrote this. "The city didn't rise up with joy at the announcement that a liberated king has just been born because people have always preferred the misery that they do know to the mystery that they don't know." It doesn't make sense but that is just human nature. Just because you know you are addicted to doing things one way doesn't mean you want to be delivered from it. This is exactly what the arrival of Christ as King is all about. Jesus didn't come to give people a holiday from Herod. He came to start a whole new thing.

⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

So the new king was supposed to come and liberate Israel and everybody from King Herod. Nobody is clearer about that than Herod himself. Herod knows that to have Christ born in your life then or now means freedom from the kings of this world. They lose their power. All the Herods do. So Herod will do everything in his power in the days ahead to extinguish the hope that is supposed to be coming to you tonight. Listen to what he does.

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

There is a place where you can find Christ. It is not just anywhere. You have to go to that place. Jesus said some people will come and deceive us saying, "There is the Messiah" or "Here is the King." Don't listen. We have to do what the Wise Men did, that Herod did not do. We have to seek God out. If we sit still like Herod did, we will never find the Christ. Back to the story.

⁹ After the Magi had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Growing up a little Catholic baby boy, I heard this every year. This was my favorite part of the story because it talked about the gifts, and that tied into my idea of Christmas, that it was about the gifts. Light brings the Magi and us to the Christ Child, and the Magi emptied their treasure chest of everything that was precious to them, unexpected, fabulous gifts, and that is when it gets to be fun. What is the best gift that comes to mind? What is the best gift you have ever gotten, unexpected or expected? Best gift. Not biggest. When I ask what the best gift is, what do you think of? Hold on to that thought because I want to give you just a little help. We wondered what an unexpected great gift would look like today, in this world, so we spared absolutely no expense and sent out an internationally known reporter to do research, and she came back with this report.

(Video shown.)

This is Mandy Jester reporting, not live, from Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis. I am here interviewing the multitudes of people asking them, what is the most unexpected gift you have ever received?

I got a sushi maker from my friend, and that was unexpected.

A Nissan Altima.

We were pretty poor growing up so I got my care bag.

Probably the 1984 Voltron Action Figure. I might be getting it this year, too.

Is it coming back?

Voltrons never left.

My first Cabbage Patch.

Unexpected in a bad way—I expected an iPod and got socks.

Did you cry?

No, I pretended that I was happy with them, and I was like "So sweet. Socks. It is awesome."

A brand new bike.

A ping-pong table. I woke up and walked upstairs, and it was already set up. My parents snuck it in in the middle of the night.

Your parents or Santa?

Santa.

Love.
Is there a love in your life?
I like you.
Well, I hope you find all the love that you desire for the holidays.
I love you.
I love you, too.
I got a conga drum for Christmas.
What is the most unexpected gift you have ever received?
Stuff that we got from our Aunty, books, and pencils and stuff like that.
A Spiderman shirt
That's awesome. That was a good gift, huh?
Love.
And how long have you been in love?
About two months.
You're going to have a good Christmas then.
You're telling me.
Do you have time to answer a quick question for me?
A sewing machine from my mother-in-law.
Do you sew?
No.
Well, how is that sewing machine doing these days?
It sits pretty idle.
It does?
A hat.
Did you say a hat?
Oh, yes.
That makes a lot of sense.
My youngest child was a big surprise.
Really?
My question for you is what is the most unexpected gift you have ever received?
A new home for Christmas this year. I'm living in a homeless shelter right now, and I found some amazing landlords. You don't even have any idea what it is like to be homeless on Christmas, but then to know that the day after Christmas, I get to move in.
I am so excited for you. The merriest of Christmases, and thank you so much. Can I hug you?

(Video ends).

Sometimes a gift can change your life. Usually a gift is, you go, "Ohhhh. Thank you." Occasionally a gift is a surprise. It is better than you thought. It is unexpected. I would like you to turn to someone, if you are courageous, someone you don't know, but just turn to someone and say, "When he talked about a special gift, what was the first thing that came to your mind?" Can you do that? One minute. Just turn to somebody, "What was an unexpected gift?" *(Pause.)*

One person said, "I passed a course I thought I failed." Unexpected gifts. Another person pointed to the person next to them and said, "This is the best gift I ever had." A dad patted his daughter on the leg and said, "Just seeing her walk through the door." Different gifts strike

different parts of our hearts. These Magi are remembered forever. These special people are remembered forever, and they are out on the fringes of God's story. They are not in the middle of Israel. They are not mentioned before or again. They are out there on the edges, but they are memorable because they give up everything. They give up their homes, and they leave. They give up their convenience. They give up their time. They give up their safety probably. They lose their reputation. They may have given up their gods, and they finally give up their treasure. They open the things most precious to them and lay them in front of a baby who is King of another country.

But what do they go away with? We talk about all the gifts we give and all the great gifts we have received, and yet somehow the idea of giving gifts to Christ, we will talk about the Christmas offering but that is not quite the same, what is God's gift to us? If Christmas is about gifts, what do the Wise Men go away with? The Magi, it says, emptied their treasure chests of all that was precious to them, and then there was room inside them for the gifts of the King. But what does the Christ Child have to give you and is there any room in the treasure chest, or are you likely to say, "Thanks. Thanks, anyway"? In the face of a cynical, materialistic, fast-paced society, what would be the best gift for you? The best gift you could get?

I thought of the gifts that have meant the most to me. Laura asked me that a couple days ago. There was the childhood chemistry set in fourth grade that I stunk up the house with. There was the gift a friend was inspired to give me that I was so excited about that I called him up at 7:00 o'clock in the morning, woke him up, to tell him. There were the gifts that have been the best of my life from my daughters, who normally give me gifts, or my wife, who loves me, special gifts. But as I thought about it, I feel like God has given me some gifts as well. I've thought about the gifts of Christmas. Will there be room in my treasure chest for them because Jesus offers you a gift?

He says, "**I come that you might have life, real life, life in all its abundance.**" Not just get up and go to work, go to school, go home, got to bed, go to the grave. There is more to it than that. I come that you might have real life." Do you have real life? Or are you just getting up and going? Maybe the gift from Jesus this year might look like this, "**Come to me all those of you who are weary and heavy burdened and I will give you rest.**" Some of you look tired, and it is not because it is after 9:00 p.m. You just look weary. You have been running too long, too fast, too hard, and you need rest. Can you be slowed down enough to receive the gift of rest? Some of you would resonate with this gift. Jesus says, "**And neither do I condemn you. Your sins are forgiven.**" Is there something you are hiding? Is there something weighing you down with guilt or shame or fear, either that nobody else knows or that somebody knows and is holding over you? Do you need to be forgiven and have a fresh start?

Perhaps the gift of Christ for you this year would be an answer to the seeming absence of God or the doubts that you have about God. He says, "**I will never leave you nor forsake you, no matter what you do, what you think, what you believe, what you don't believe. I will never leave you.**" Would you like to have that assurance that God would love you so much He would never leave you? The apostle Paul lost everything else in his life but he says, "I have become absolutely convinced of this: that there is nothing in all of creation, not height nor depth, not heaven nor hell, not life nor death, not angels nor demons, nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Wouldn't you like to go to bed and feel like that? Wouldn't that be a gift? Perhaps for some of you, you would want the gift that I have received this year. In the midst

of all the stress, pressures, the anxieties, frankly, the losses of a tough economy and rough times for everybody, the gift I feel like I am receiving comes when Jesus turns to me and says, **“Peace! Peace I give you! Peace! Not like the world gives it, but peace for your soul.”** It sits right over the knot in my stomach and replaces it with a sense of peace. What gift would you ask the King for as you went away? Would there be any emptiness in your treasure chest for it?

This part of the story ends by saying, “After they gave their gifts to the king, they went home by a different way.” They weren’t the same. They went home by a different way. The light of the star had brought them to the light of the world, and as they left, the light of the world was now at their backs. C. S. Lewis talks about this. He said, “I have come to believe in Christ, not just because of whom He is. I believe in Christ the way I believe in the sun, not only because I see it but because by the light of the sun, I see everything else differently.” As you walk away from this Christmas, will the light show you a different way home or are you just going to get up tomorrow and go back to Herod’s kingdom and live like a religious person? The point of Christmas is not for us to make Christians of other people. The point is for us to become Christians *for* other people so that they will see us emptying our treasure in front of the King and going out as filled-people, sharing our treasure with them.

You know, the story only makes sense if the Wise Men get there too late. Jesus has already been born. They didn’t get there *before* or *as* He was born. It was afterwards. We don’t even know how long afterwards. That reminds me that it is never too late. It is never too late to go home a different way. It is never too soon to ask directions, but it is never too late to empty your heart, your treasure, to receive from God the only thing that your heart really needs—faith and hope and love that will not let you go. Let’s pray.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You brought light to the Magi and to us. I thank You for this, the courage to go and the willingness to ask for directions. I thank You that they saw You at the end of the way, and that they left everything else in front of You. They went home by a different way, praising God and filled with joy. Be with us this Christmas Eve. In the Name of the Father, in the Name of the Son, in the Name of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.