

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**December 24, 2013**  
**John Crosby**  
**REJOICE: The Gift of the Incarnation**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**

Today I sat down and for the first time in more than a week, felt myself slow down and settle. I pray this happened or will happen to you because the American Christmas season does not lend itself to contemplation and quiet. The American Christmas season is all about finding the perfect gift with increased pressure to do so. The reality is that the shelf life of most Christmas gifts is probably a little bit like this. [Photo shown.] The torn paper and broken toys near the tree are signs of “we really tried!” and they did try hard. But sometimes gifts last. They connect. This is a picture of a Burberry scarf from 31 years ago that someone gave me, and as soon as I find it, it will be very meaningful again. [Photo shown.] Gifts are an important part of the story.

Let me just get the highlights of what Rich just read to us. Matthew says that when the Wise Men saw the star stop, they were overwhelmed with joy. Going into the house, they saw the Child with Mary, His mother, and they fell down and worshipped Him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to King Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

I love that part of the story. It’s such a reminder to me of the real gifts of Christmas, the gifts we offer one another in joy, the gifts we offer to the King, and the gifts that King Jesus offers us that bring joy and send us home by another way, a different way. What kind of gifts would the King of Heaven put under your tree this year? There ought to be a gift for everybody at Christmas.

We believe that the Christmas King comes to offer us gifts that make gold and frankincense and myrrh pale in comparison. The Christmas Baby King offers the same gifts to everybody because at Christmas one size *can* fit all. The Christmas King offers a restored sense of wonder to people who have become jaded by the holidays, burned out, and who need to recover a sense that life is filled with wonder. There are pictures of great beauty that we run by. There are heart-stopping displays of God’s power in nature. There is a reminder in the nature of children to be curious that amongst all the whining brings us to life with great joy. And surely wonder comes from the Christmas King if we could ever stop and watch and see the dolphins singing praise to the King at sunrise.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “God makes us happy but only as children are happy.” You’re most prepared for Christmas when you’re done buying and performing. Instead you sit back and start to marvel at His presence. That’s the gift. Have you lost your childlike wonder? Have you grown increasingly frenetic or even cynical about the holiday? Open the gift of the Baby King and let wonder restore your heart.

Sometimes one size does fit all, we all get the same gift, but other times I believe that the miracle of Christmas comes when each gift is different because each child is different. You know that each child is different and each season of your life is different. Some of you need the gift of healing. This has been a season of pain and you need to be freed from the fear of what has passed you by or what lies ahead, whether that is in life or death, sickness or despair.

In the same way, some of you come here and if you are honest, the gift that you would most need, whether you ask for it or not, would be a new beginning of forgiveness, of a restored, reconciled relationship. You are weighted down, either with guilt or with anger, and both of these stop love. You are stopped by habits that you cannot break or baggage that seems too heavy to carry and impossible to let go of. You need to be forgiven. The Christ King offers you a fresh start.

I watch you and I listen to you and so many of you are anxious. Your hearts are filled with anxiety and the latest ones are “Will this gift work?” “Can I afford this gift?” “Will my job still be there?” You live lives that are anxious and what you need is to be contented. You need a gift that someone can just hand you and you can go, “Ahhhh!” The apostle Paul says, “I have learned the secret to contentment.”

<sup>12</sup> . . . . I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation . . . .  
[Philippians 4:11]

And you are desperate, whether you are a student or a retiree, for that secret. We are frenetic people, we Americans. We run from activity to activity, but so often the running stops us from doing life that’s meaningful, meaning-FULL, filled, other-oriented. You’re in the rat race and you are in danger of becoming a rat, so the King of Heaven would love to offer you a sense of calling, calling that says, “Go home by a different way. Live differently this next year. Live like Joy Johnson.”

Some of you remember Joy Johnson from the Today Show. Every year the day after the New York City Marathon, she would be interviewed by Al Roker. She didn’t start running until she was in her sixties, and this year she completed her 25<sup>th</sup> New York City Marathon at age 86. She fell at Mile 20 and finished with a bandage on her head. The reason she ran was that she felt called to encourage others who needed to run the race with her. Joy died the day after the marathon this year. She went up for a nap and ran into the presence of the King with her shoes on. She fell at Mile 20 but finished because she said,

<sup>31</sup> But those who wait on the LORD  
Shall renew *their* strength;  
They shall mount up with wings like eagles . . . . [Isaiah 40:31]

She said she didn’t know eagles could walk that slowly. Do you need that kind of calling in your life? Not to be the fastest or the strongest or the wealthiest or the best known, but to have a life that’s filled with meaning? These are the gifts of the King. They are fit for any child of the King who wants to be like the Wise Men, who wants to be filled with joy and sent home to live another way.

Of all the gifts at Christmas, the most tragic one is not the one that’s broken. It’s not the one

that's the wrong size, not the one that won't fit, not even the one that comes too late. The worst of the gifts is the gift that does not get opened, and for many of you there are unopened gifts because you don't know how needy you are. Or you can't believe that if you opened yourself up, you could actually get that gift. Bishop Oscar Romero once said,

No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly needy . . . Without poverty of spirit, there can be no abundance of God.

Blessed are the poor for theirs is the Kingdom.

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [Matthew 5:3].

Is there any poverty, any need, stirring in you? Frankly, I think of someone who knows this better than I do. Her name is Jackie Turner. She is 26 years old. She is a Presidential Scholar at William Jessup University, a 4.0 GPA student with a good life ahead of her. She became known to the general public because she posted an ad on Craigslist that had over 3 million hits before it was taken down. It was posted because her childhood was much different from her life now. She was physically and emotionally and sexually abused. She fled her home as a teenager, and out in the streets she found drugs and sex and gangs and crime. She was caught and convicted of grand theft and spent a year in prison. After a year, she was released early because she agreed to go to a camp for troubled teens, Christian Encounter Ministries.

She went there and somehow met King Jesus for Christmas. Jesus, the King, gave her the gift of a new life and a new direction that she's taken advantage of. But her ad on Craigslist said this: “I am looking to rent a mom and dad, who can give me attention and make me feel like the light of their life just for a couple of days because I really need it.” She was soliciting a family at Christmastime, and she said she could pay, well, at most, \$8 an hour. There were 3.4 million responses and dozens of people who said, “Please come into our home.” This year Jackie is arranging a variety of parties for others just like her, who have a life to share and no one to be loved by.

Bob Shank tells this story and he finishes by saying:

Humanity had not taken out an ad in Craigslist, but the universal need 2000 years ago was unmistakable: everyone was lonely.

Everyone needs to be loved in ways that don't let go, that will not judge them or hold them up to mockery or walk away when it gets hard.

The essential need for authentic connection . . . is built into the fabric of every person. What God designed into His creation – continuing connection with Him, and with one another – had been shattered in Eden, and impossible to reclaim until Calvary. “Rent-a-family” is no solution. You can't pay for intimacy that satisfies, but you can receive it as a gift.

Love that satisfies the soul set God into a cattle stall to hand out gifts from the King of Life and Death and Love. Love is No. 1 on every Christmas list, love that will not let us go.

Holiday loneliness gets 3.4 million Google hits; the real solution has just one: it's Jesus . .  
. . God's plan: *No more Jackies...*

My wife Laura loves the poet, Ann Voskamp. This is an excerpt from Ann's new book, *The Greatest Gift*.

Tonight, at the foot of the cradle of Christ, like at the foot of the Cross of Christ, there are no big people - no powerful, no proud. Tonight there are only those who tramp to the manger with nothing; there are only the manger tramps, the men who lay down all the self-made, the women who lay down all the self-sufficiency, the children who lay down all the wants. We, the manger tramps, who kneel where thrones tremble and demons fall and the self-made crumble and the self-righteous weep.

Tonight there are only the manger tramps, who tramp in with all our poverty of spirit ... so there can be an abundance of God.

So there can be great joy and another way back home.

Lord Jesus, I pray that You, who left the manger to go to the cross and left the cross to come back for us, fulfill us with joy and give us the gift that You alone know that we need and send us home by another way, Your way, Father, Son, and Spirit. 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.*