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Theme: "Gifts"

Sermon: "Gifts"

December 13, 2015

Call to Worship: Adapted from Isaiah 9

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.

As the days grow shorter and darker—
As the days do not grow colder, which brings its own kind of fearful chill—
May we find lights to guide our way.
May we seek the lights of peace, hope, and joy
And find in this time together the kindling for our flame.

Reading: a Christmas reflection by the prolific essayist G.K. Chesterton, 1874-1936

What has happened to me has been the very reverse of what appears to be the experience of most of my friends. Instead of dwindling to a point, Santa Claus has grown larger and larger in my life until he fills almost the whole of it. It happened in this way.

As a child I was faced with a phenomenon requiring explanation. I hung up at the end of my bed an empty stocking, which in the morning became a full stocking. I had done nothing to produce the things that filled it. I had not worked for them, or made them or helped to make them. I had not even been good—far from it. And the explanation was that a certain being whom people called Santa Claus was benevolently disposed toward me. . . . What we believed was that a certain benevolent agency did give us those toys for nothing.

And, as I say, I believe it still. I have merely extended the idea. Then I only wondered who put the toys in the stocking; now I wonder who put the stocking by the bed, and the bed in the room, and the room in the house, and the house on the planet, and the great planet in the void. Once I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dolls and crackers, now, I thank him for stars and street faces and wine and the great sea. Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a present so big that it only went halfway into the stocking.

Now I am delighted and astonished every morning to find a present so big that it takes two stockings to hold it, and then leaves a great deal outside; it is the large and preposterous present of myself, as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion except that Santa Claus gave it to me in a fit of peculiarly fantastic goodwill.

Sermon: “Gifts”

I confess I have a sort of complicated relationship with the Hanukkah song “Light One Candle.” My husband Ben and I both have Jewish heritage, we love Peter, Paul and Mary, and we love folk music in general... which is probably how that song ended up on a playlist of calming folk music that Ben put together for when I was in labor with my first daughter Marjory, who was born in June. As I recall it, I was basically in haze of pain, and every 45 minutes or so this song would cycle through, and I’d sit up and say, “Why are we listening to the Hanukkah song?” Except I would use more expletives. So even though it is a Hanukkah song, and not a Christmas song, listening to it always gives me a very visceral feeling of Advent: the Advent of the birth of a child who would change everything. At least, for me. She was a gift so small she probably could have fit entirely into one of our oversized Christmas stockings, and now it takes two stockings to hold her, and a great deal is left outside.

Our worship theme this month is gifts, so I want to talk a little bit about the three wise men, who brought gifts to the baby Jesus.

The four gospels of the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each tell the story of the birth of Jesus differently. Mark and John don’t tell it at all. Luke focuses on the shepherds. The story of the three wise men comes from the book of Matthew.

Matthew uses this story to remind us of how Jesus was born into an empire of fear and greed, the empire of King Herod. The three wise men see a star rising in the East, signaling a prophecy: a child has been born who will become king of the Jews.

Herod hears of the prophecy and is frightened. Even with all his power, he worried this baby could unseat him. Herod cannot stand any threat to his power and authority. So he flatters the wise men, tells them he wants to worship this baby too, so make sure to let him know where they find him. But really his plan is to kill the baby as soon as he can.

Matthew writes:

The wise men set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Humans have been embroidering those sparse sentences with details for two thousand years: we have songs, paintings, stories, tapestries, plastic lawn ornaments that light up, all imagining what these wise men, these three kings, might have looked like, thought, hoped for.

The wise men offered Jesus gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Frankincense and myrrh are both types of incense: resins that can be harvested from trees and burned to create strong, sweet scents. Strange gifts to give a baby.

One mystic priest in the 12th century, Bernard of Clairvaux, speculated that the gifts were actually for Mary: gold to relieve her poverty; frankincense to dispel the bad odor of the stable; and myrrh to drive away vermin and worms.

So I guess “push gifts” are not such a new idea.

These gifts are more mythical than historical. The book of Matthew was written 40-70 years after Jesus died, so the author knows how this story will end. The gifts have symbolic meaning in the context of the whole narrative.

Gold symbolizes Jesus coming as a king—more powerful than King Herod.

Frankincense was often burned in worship, so it symbolizes Jesus embodying the divine.

And myrrh was often used in embalming and at funerals, so it symbolizes Jesus humanity and mortality.

The Christmas gifts that we give each other are also packed with symbolism.

We don't usually just hand each other cash. “Here, I love you \$20 worth. Here, I love you \$100 worth.” Gift-giving is a way of showing our love for each other in a non-verbal, tangible way.

Psychologist Gary Chapman has based his career on his description of “the five love languages.” The five languages are:

Words of Affirmation – saying I love you

Quality Time – giving attention, doing something together

Acts of Service – making someone dinner, or taking out the trash

Physical Touch – Holding hands and beyond

And Gift-giving – a tangible message of caring

People who speak the language of gift-giving put a lot of time and energy into picking out thoughtful gifts, and they feel extremely moved by giving and receiving gifts—from the littlest token to the biggest splurge.

For people whose main love language is gift-giving, getting a bad gift—or no gift at all—is like hearing “I don't love you.” And being told not to give a gift is hard too—like being told to stop giving hugs!

Gift-giving and receiving difficulties are a mainstay of advice columnists.

I love reading those letters this time of year. There was the great aunt who gave her new Jewish nephew-in-law a nativity set for Christmas. Well, at least he didn't have one already!¹

In another instance, a woman gave her father-in-law the “Clapper” that device turns on and off lights when you clap. But her father-in-law had had a stroke two years before, limiting the use of his left arm—he couldn't clap.²

My husband Ben has a few stories from his childhood, thanks to a few family members, who, shall we say, were not really into gift giving. One year from an uncle, little boy Ben got a can of

¹ Carolyn Hax advice columnist online chat

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/discussion/2008/12/03/DI2008120302473.html>

² <http://live.washingtonpost.com/carolyn-hax-live-20151211.html>

pineapple. Another year he received D batteries... which really got his hopes up that some amazing toy was going to follow...but nope, the gift was just the D batteries.

Sometimes it seems like gift giving causes more problems and hurt feelings than happiness and joy. But sometimes thoughtful gift-giving can be a way to heal a family trauma.

A good friend of mine has a family with many complex issues (doesn't every family?). She and her aunt had once been very close, and then had a difficult falling out. Her aunt wrote her an angry message saying that she didn't think they should exchange holiday or birthday gifts any more—something that had always been important between them. But my friend was not willing to give up on her aunt. She wrote back saying that gift-giving had always been meaningful for their relationship, and she was not going to stop sending gifts.

And for three years, for her aunt's birthday and Christmas, my friend spent a great deal of time and energy finding and mailing nice, thoughtful gifts. At first, she got nothing in response.

A year or so later, a few trinkets came in return—the kind of the stuff you'd find at CVS in the half-off bin the day after Christmas—but no personal message. And then, three years later, her aunt sent her a package with the most meaningful gift of all—a kind letter. Since then they have been able to rebuild their relationship—all thanks to those gifts that said, “I won't give up on you.”

I speak gift-giving as a second language. I get more excited about quality time.

You might have a family member, friend, or spouse who speaks a different “love language” than you—we have to learn to speak each other's languages.

At Christmas I imagine that God is trying to speak one of the human love languages. Most of the time, my language of reverence is full of abstractions and big concepts:

Justice! Hope! The worth and dignity of every person!

Then along comes a story about baby in a manger. All of a sudden my big, abstract concept of a mysterious, unknowable, transcendent God...gets funneled down into the form of a tiny, vulnerable, crying baby.

From a faith that is in my head, to a faith that is in my heart.

Christmas is a story about a love you can hold. A love you can tickle. A love you can feed. A love so big it can only be contained in the tiniest of packages. A baby.

I don't want to let this month of “Gifts” go by without sharing some of the stories that have been streaming in to me about how you used the Reverse Offering you received on Thanksgiving Sunday. I passed out money from the Minister's Discretionary Fund and asked you to make a gift in a way that felt meaningful to you.

So far, you've given donations to the Urban Ministry, the Episcopal Actors' Guild, the American Cancer Society, and Kiva, just to name a few.

You've donated to local food pantries and then decided to match your donation with your time, as well—starting new family traditions of volunteering.

You've given money to a musician busking in the subway and told him how much his music means to you.

You've given your offering to the head of the farmer's market and asked her to make sure a family who uses SNAP funds gets it.

You've been able to take a tag from our Giving Tree when ordinarily you wouldn't have had the

extra dollars to do so. One seven year old told his parents he wanted to give to Unicef, to help Syrian refugee children, and his parents and grandparents matched his gift.

There are so many other stories, and I look forward to sharing more with you as they keep coming in.

Here's one story that is actually a few years old, but has the same spirit of the Reverse Offering. In my last church a parishioner told me this story. That year her 22 year-old son Sam asked family and friends to take whatever amount they had thought of spending on him for the holidays, and instead of getting him a present, give something away in his name.

Their family friend Janet spent some time looking for someone to give a gift to. On her frequent trips through North Station, Janet noticed a homeless woman. She was usually sitting near the Dunkin Donuts, softly asking passers-by to buy her a jelly donut. The management at North Station would roughly push her out, but she kept coming back, for the warmth and the possibility of a meal. Mostly people ignored her, but sometimes a person would buy her a donut.

So on the first day of Hanukkah, Janet looked for the woman at North Station.

She was there on her usual bench, asking everyone who passed for a jelly donut. Janet went to the Dunkin Donuts counter and bought a gift card for \$50. She sat down next to the woman and gave her the card, explaining how much it was for and that it was a gift from her friend Sam. The woman looked at her with frightened eyes, took the card and moved away to another bench. Janet waved good-bye.

And it could have ended there, but Janet happened to walk through North Station again a few days later. The woman was there on her bench, and called out to her, "Hey lady, Sam would like to buy you a jelly donut." She was smiling and holding her hand out. Janet took her hand and they stood in line at Dunkin Donuts together. When it was their turn the woman ordered a jelly donut, gave it to Janet and said, "This is from our friend Sam."

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

May our guiding star be gratitude for our many blessings, and the will and way with which to share them—with gifts, with words, with deeds, whatever way we can.

May we give thanks for all the gifts in our lives, dolls and crackers and stars and street faces and wine and the great sea, and the large and preposterous present of ourselves, the gift of life itself.

Amen.