



Giftng Christmas Presence: Give More

John 1:1-18

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December 17, 2017

In a previous appointment, I served with a senior pastor who had an unmatched obsession with counting down the days to Christmas. He is not someone who waited for the 1st of December to begin counting down on a traditional 24-day advent calendar. He posts no less than once a month an update of how many days until Christmas throughout the year, beginning his countdown by posting on December 26, *Only 364 days until Christmas*.

You don't have to be as obsessed with counting down to Christmas to be now reminded, in one week we will be celebrating Christmas Eve with our morning brunch and our evening candlelight service. I hope you'll be here to celebrate next weekend as we hear the familiar Christmas story, sing the familiar songs, and celebrate once more the great work of God in the birth of Christ. As we did last year, you will also be invited to worship at home on December 25th as you gather with family and friends to celebrate Christmas Day. You'll see the *Worship Where You Are* service arrive in your email later this week, and it will be available on the church website.

For as familiar as the Christmas story is, for all the visuals that come to mind of the nativity (the sheep, the donkey, Mary and Joseph, and the sweet little 6-pound, 8-ounce baby Jesus), today's reading in John could not be further from the familiar readings. In contrast to the stories of the angels, the shepherds, the magi, and the unaccommodating Innkeeper, John's gospel does not tell us a timeline of events. John doesn't tell us about the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. John does not tell us of the contextual circumstances into which Christ was born. John does not even tell us about the not-so-silent night, into which a baby was born screaming from a barn before he was laid in a feeding trough. "What John does is weave the celebration of Christmas into the logos, the story that has provided the logic of creation from God's first creative word until now."ⁱ John doesn't tell us a chronicle of events that happened in a backwoods town in the shadow of Jerusalem in the first century; John tells us the impact of Christ's birth of the whole of creation.

In his announcement of Christ's birth, John goes back to the start, using the very same words as we find at the first of Genesis. "*In the beginning,*" John says, "was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being." John is not going to hide the divine identity of Jesus. "Divine identity is clear from the inauguration of time. Long before taking on human flesh, Jesus, the Word, was with God ... even more, Jesus was God."ⁱⁱ

I often wonder if in the midst of our preparation, we forget about the miraculous significance of Christmas.

Anyone can correctly identify and name that Christmas is the celebration of Christ's birth. Even my 4-year olds can tell you that the celebration of Christmas is about Jesus and his birthday. In fact, in preparation for Christmas this year, we've been hosting multiple birthday parties at the house. Teddy

Bear, Monkey, Kitty, and Peggy (the penguin) have all celebrated their birthdays in past few weeks. Even this morning, in Children's Church, the kids are celebrating Jesus' birthday party.

The challenge of preparing for Christmas isn't being able to remember that this holiday is about the birth of Christ. The challenge of preparing for Christmas is understanding and embracing the impact of what it means that Christ is born. What does it mean that Jesus – who was in the beginning with God – and who in the beginning **was** God – has become one of us ... has become in-fleshed ... has become incarnate?

Look back at John's gospel, the evangelist tells us the significance. Beginning in verse 12, we read, "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God. The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

Come on now church – we are talking about the glory of Christmas here. I hope you're filled with the giddiness of a child on Christmas morning staring at the presents under the tree when you hear this. This is good news John is preaching.

Christmas is not just the celebration of the birth of a baby in a manger, it's the recognition that this child is God become as humanity – literally that God's Word, the very teaching of God, materialized in the person of Jesus – so that we as humanity might be filled with grace upon grace, that we might know truth personified, and that we might know *God*. "The wonder of the incarnation is that when Word becomes flesh, human history is irrevocably changed ... [because] the relationship between God and humanity is forever altered."ⁱⁱⁱ

This is what John Calvin called *God's condescension*: "In Jesus, God becomes accessible to us ... the eternal and immutable God [has become] finite and vulnerable in order to become truly available to us."^{iv}

Now, last week I spoke a bit about how in the holiday season, we Americans have a spending problem. Holiday spending in the US will easily top \$600 billion this year; the average US family will spend over \$1000 on Christmas gifts; and this isn't shocking news, for over 80% of Americans agree we spend too much at Christmas, but we spend it anyway. Yet, in the midst of how much we spend, I offered last week that the primary issue isn't necessarily that we spend too much, but rather, it is perhaps our reasoning for spending so much that underlies the problem. Then this week you show up, and you find the sermon title is listed as *Give More*. Well, which is it Pastor? Do you want us to give more, or spend less?

One book I'm reading on Advent spending offers that "God's answer for the world's problems has never been [in giving] material things." The authors challenge the usual spending habits at Christmas because our spending habits do not line up with the model of how God offers salvation to humanity. Such a critique of holiday spending seems logical, but perhaps lacking in theological depth. It seems to

me that John says the way God solves our problems is very much in the materialism of the Word incarnate.

When John says God became incarnate, or in-fleshed, it means just what you think it means. “God became bone and skin and guts. It’s not [just] that Jesus is God – it’s that Jesus, as God, chose to become one of us. **That** is the incarnation.”^v The incarnation is literally the materializing of the Word as one of the created humanity. In Matthew’s Gospel, we’re told the name of this child will be Immanuel, which in Hebrew means, “God with us.” Alan Hirsch says it this way, in the incarnation, the one who spoke galaxies into existence “moved into our neighborhood in an act of humble love.”^{vi}

Jesus is God’s material gift to humanity. When the people of God could not find their way to salvation, God gave the gift of Christ. When the people of God could not heal their brokenness, God gave the gift of Christ. When the people of God were in exile, separated from home and family, God gave the gift of Christ. When the people of God were under the power of an oppressive government, God gave the gift of Christ.

But John says Christ was not a gift just for the people who walked the world in the first century middle east. John says, “to all who have received him, to all who have believe in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”

That means Jesus is God’s material gift to humanity even still today. When we are fearful of death, we remember God’s gift of Christ that provides eternal life. When we are fearful of oppression, we remember God’s gift of Christ that frees the oppressed. When we are fearful of injustice, we remember God’s gift of Christ that causes justice to flow on like a river. When we find our nation split between left and right, we remember God’s gift of Christ that provides the reconciliation of all people. When we are exhausted from the negativity that surrounds us, we remember God’s gift of Christ that offers rest for the weary. When we find ourselves at our wits end, we remember God’s gift of Christ that offers new beginnings.

And in the preparation for the season of Christmas, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, as we prepare to once more celebrate God’s gift of Jesus, we are reminded that the birth of Christ is not just marked by this lovely over-priced Hallmark holiday, which calls for the decorations, parties, egg nog, travelling, and sweets galore. This is a celebration that is marked by the greatest gift the world has ever received in the materialized person of Jesus Christ. And in the receipt of such a gift, we are invited participate in the gift-giving of God. “Because we have seen God in Jesus, we are emboldened both to live with hope as well as share with others that hope that is within us.”^{vii}

I imagine that most of us have been on the receiving end of gifts that were ... well ... *special*. You know what I mean, right? These are the gift that you never asked for, but they are ones you can’t just throw out after you receive them. Like the “not-quite-so-ugly” Christmas sweater that Aunt Mertle gave you, that you never want to wear, but that for the next three years you’ll wear to the family Christmas gathering just to not piss off Aunt Mertle. Then there’s the gift card to a restaurant that your cousin loves to go out to, but that doesn’t actually have a location in your town. And let’s not forget about the awkwardness of opening up a package of undergarments from mom or dad on Christmas morning the first year you bring your partner home.

Some gifts are just better ungiven.

But what if we took the model of God's gift of Christ as a model for our giving? The gift of Christ rewrites the relationship between humanity with one another, and it offers resolve to the relationship between humanity and God. What if our giving at Christmas was not offered from a sense of obligation, but instead offered the love of reconciled relationships? For example, tomorrow morning, we will have a few folks heading over to Jefferson Houston to serve lunch to the teachers – offering a gift of partnership and conveying our thanks for the work of the teachers in the lives of the children of our community as an expression of God's gift of relationship. Next week, on Christmas morning, we will be hosting our Open Table breakfast as we do every Monday. One of our volunteers has already offered to come and play music with a couple friends in a string trio on Christmas morning for the breakfast guests. Sharing of their musical talents in a private Christmas morning concert offers a deepening of relationships in unexpected ways.

Imagine how such gift giving could materialize in your own family ... like buying a bag of coffee for a family member, with a stipulation that the coffee must be enjoyed together as you share in remembering stories from your past. Or the gift of a fishing pole, with an accompanying calendar of open dates for you to go fishing together. Or what about gifting a camera or smart phone with a scavenger hunt attached, inviting the person to take pictures of certain places, people, or things, with the expectation that next Christmas, you'll go through the pictures together and recount the year's journeys.

See, I wonder, how can we celebrate Christmas in such a way that, amidst the circus like affair, we don't forget about the gift of Jesus, given by God, that invites us to be – indeed, according to John, that makes us – different people? Pushing the expectations of simply remembering that Christmas is about Christ's birthday, how can we celebrate in such a way that the significance of Christ's birth is what is celebrated, as opposed to the simple invitation to give and receive gifts?

What if the gift we give to others is founded on the hope we receive in Christ? What if the gift we give others is our material presence, like that we receive in Christ? What if the gift we give others is the promise of new life, eternal love, and a welcome for all?

As we make the final preparations to celebrate Christmas in just 8 days, I invite you to consider what it means to give more. To give more of yourself. To give more of your love. To give more of your life. For in the Word made flesh, we have received the greatest material gift of all time, a gift through which we are reconciled to the Lord. A gift that claims us as children of God, that promises we have already received all we need to live, to love, to give, and to know Christmas is worth the celebration. Let us prepare to celebrate well!

ⁱ Richard W. Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of John: A Storyteller's Commentary*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Kimberly Bracken Long. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 1*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} David Lose. davidlose.net. Retrieved December 13, 2017.

^v Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, & Greg Holder. *Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Lose.