



## Gifts Christmas Presence: Spend Less

Isaiah 40:1-11

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What do you love most about the season of Advent and the celebration of Christmas? What makes it a successful holiday season? Have you ever stopped and thought about what it is that you enjoy most in the celebration of Christmas? Or, do you rely on the traditions of the season that you've always taken part in to continue to guide your seasonal celebration?

For example, growing up, my family had this Christmas Eve tradition. We would begin the evening by going to our church's Candlelight service. Following the service, we'd go home and go through our collection of Christmas stories and find one we wanted to read. Then, beginning with my sister, the youngest, we'd go from person to person, each reading our Christmas story. Following each story, the person got to select a Christmas song to sing. By the time we were done, we would have read five stories and sung five Christmas songs.

My father, as the oldest in the family, would always go last. He would always read the same book: *The Cajun Night Before Christmas*. In the book, following the traditional story line and verse of *The Night before Christmas*, Santa's water skipper is instead pulled by eight alligators. My dad, in his best Cajun accent would read:

*"Twas the night before Christmas an' all t'ru de house,  
Dey don't a ting pass Not even a mouse.  
De chirren been nezzle good snug on de flo',  
An' Mama pass de pepper t'ru de crack on de do'.  
De Mama in de fireplace done roas' up de ham,  
Sit up de gumbo an' make de bake yam.  
Den out on de by-you dey got such a clatter,  
Make soun' like old Boudreau done fall off his ladder.  
I run like a rabbit to got to de do',  
Trip over de dorg an' fall on de flo'.  
As I look out de do'in de light o' de moon,  
I t'ink, "Mahn, you crazy or got ol' too soon."  
Cux dere on de by-you w'en I stretch ma'neck stiff,  
Dere's eight alligator a pullin' de skiff.  
An' a little fat drover wit' a long pole-ing stick,  
I know r'at away got to be ole St.Nick."*

It was the most ridiculous thing you ever heard. But it was tradition, and so every year, we heard the story. My dad knew the story well enough, he could recite the full book without a glance at the text.

Another Christmas tradition at my house growing up was the madness of opening the stockings. Once mom or dad said go, there was no break for civilized conversation. Each of us began pulling out presents from the stockings and opening them, pausing only long enough between gifts to acknowledge our joy and excitement, and to see how far along everyone else was in the opening process. Marrying into Jen's family, the practice on Christmas morning is now much different. On Christmas morning, we still begin with the stockings, but now we open the stocking gifts one ... by ... one. Maybe by December 26<sup>th</sup>, we're about ready to move to the gifts under the tree.

Some traditions are good, and are well worth maintaining. And truly, Christmas just wouldn't feel like Christmas if it weren't for the joy of family traditions. But some traditions are perhaps worth reconsidering.

For example, beginning in the year 2000, Americans have spent over \$400 billion dollars each year in the Holiday Season. Since 2014, that number has topped \$600 billion dollars each year. This year is off the same traditional start, only better. On the opening weekend of holiday sales, Americans spent \$2.87 billion on Thanksgiving Day, \$5.03 billion on Black Friday, and a whopping \$6.59 billion on Cyber Monday – and that's just the online sales. In all, between Thursday and Monday of Thanksgiving weekend, over \$20 billion in Holiday sales.

The act of spending and buying in the holiday season is becoming one of the primary traditions of our nation. And lest you think I stand here in the pulpit to judge you for how much you're spending, I can assure you I did more than my fair share in contributing to the record breaking online sales over Thanksgiving weekend.

The tradition of spending too much in preparation for Christmas comes with another tried and true tradition – the tradition of complaining about the consumeristic nature of Christmas. Yes, just as much as we regularly practice the art of spending, we also practice the art of complaining about how much we're spending. You've probably heard some of the clichés that argue against the secular and cultural celebration of Christmas that drive the holiday purchases, like, *we need to put Christ back in Christmas* and *Jesus is the reason for the season*.

Such a tradition is as old as Christmas in America itself. In 1850, Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, wrote a story called "Christmas" wherein the main character gripes:

"Christmas is coming in a fortnight, and I have got to think up presents for everybody! Dear me, it's so tedious! To which, her aunt responds, "... when I was a girl, presents did not fly about as they do now."

The traditions of spending much and complaining about spending much are *not* new. In his book, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*, author Ronald Hutton cites journal entries as far back as 1600 describing Christian's habits of spending and gift-giving, but also their complaints about the rising costs of Christmas meals, entertainment, and gifts.

As Rev. Jason Micheli jokingly witted at our Advent Advance back in November, “bemoaning what we’ve done to the Christmas tradition *is* a Christmas tradition at least 400 years old, leading me to wonder if the magi spent their trip back from Bethlehem complaining about the cost of the myrrh.”

In reality, you don’t need to come to church to hear a sermon on holiday spending to be convinced we spend too much at Christmas. Polls suggest that 80-95% of Americans already know the holiday season has become too commercial and consumer-driven. I’m not convinced you need to come to church that hear a sermon about how guilty you should feel in regards to how much you spend at Christmas. The call of the church shouldn’t be to enter into Christmas with a feeling of guilt as you prepare to celebrate the hope of God in Christ. Christ wasn’t sent to guilt us into faithfulness.

But how we prepare for Christmas – how we prepare ourselves to encounter God’s ultimate gift in the birth of Christ – is important for us to talk about and think on. The prophet Isaiah offers us a needed, if challenging, word on preparation.

Our text today comes in Isaiah 40, right at the start of what we call Deutero, or Second, Isaiah. The people of Judah have just been conquered by the Babylonians and have been sent into exile. The temple has been destroyed. The normal way of life has been revoked. The community’s institutions and structures that gave identity to the people have been abolished.

The season of exile is not a new place for the people of Israel. The exile is but an echo of the wilderness through which they were brought into the land of Judah from Egypt. In exile, as in the wilderness, there is no clear path forward. In such pain, the community relies on the voice of leaders for stability and for prophets to guide the way home. Into this season of the people of Judah, Isaiah speaks.

Unlike some of the other prophets who focus on the condemnation of God that has led to the exile, instead of blaming the people, Isaiah focuses on hope, comfort, and joy. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.” Isaiah is speaking on behalf of God to the people of God. In the Hebrew text, the word *comfort* is found in the plural, imperative form. Isaiah speaks as if God is demanding of them, “Be comforted all my people.”

After a word demanding the people be comforted, Isaiah offers the reason they should be comforted, and offers directions for preparing for God’s comfort to be realized. “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.”

In his poetic way, Isaiah says that the coming of God’s comfort will not be hindered. The people, living in the wilderness, are to prepare the way of the Lord. Do you hear the call to prepare? The valleys shall be lifted up; the mountains and hills made low; uneven ground will

be made level. Isaiah says that in our preparation, every hindrance to God's glory shall be taken away. Even the terrain itself shall be altered such that there is nothing to slow the coming of God's glory.

What constitutes of God's glory? Isaiah continues, the glory of God comes in the Word. We, as people, we are grass, which withers; even the reprieve of flowers is temporary, as they fade away. Though we are grass and flowers, which wither and fade, the glory of God in the Word will stand forever.

The prophet, speaking to a people in exile, speaking to a people experiencing the harshness of the wilderness, confirms their greatest fears and their most desirable expectations. You are but grass, and you will wither and fade – your life is not guaranteed. But in the joy of holy glory, in the promise of God's Word, the reward of God shall be eternal.

In truth, I find the text here in Isaiah to be hard to preach. In our reality, it is hard for us to know the kind of pain into which Isaiah is speaking. For our majority, the pain of being conquered, the pain of exile, the pain of losing house and home, the pain of having no voice, vote, wealth, or stability is not our general experience. It is hard for us to think of the misery of the people to whom the prophet speaks.

Perhaps the closest we come in our nation to sharing in the experience of the exile and wilderness is to hear the story of the Native Americans, as they share the misery as an overseas people came from a foreign land, pillaging their camps, forcing them into foreign territories, and taking away from them their historical and cultural identity.

Yet, if we cannot identify ourselves as wilderness people, we will have a hard time understanding the context of Advent. The promise of God in the advent of Christ is that to people who have been exiled, to people who have been discriminated, to people who have been excommunicated, to people who have been oppressed, to people who live on the margins, to people who do not share in the wealth and power of the nation, God is sending the peace of the Word which will reconcile the people of God to one another and to all humanity. The promise of God's hope is for people in the wilderness – people who are lost, broken, and suffering.

And, for as much as I don't really care how much you spend in preparation for Christmas, perhaps we do need to address the question of *why* we spend so much in the holiday season. Is it because we are not a wilderness people; a people who are clinging on to every penny in hope of making it one more day? Is it because we have no concern for the wilderness in which people in our world and our community are living?

“Our economy and our society have accepted radical greed as the norm, and each of us somehow justifies the suffering of others that our lifestyle causes.”<sup>i</sup> If we can't see how our practice of preparing for Christmas affects others, we have joined the ranks of the Babylonians at the expense of those we have cast into exile. “As soon as we treat Advent as nothing other

than looking forward to and toward the big event of Jesus' birth, we have bypassed the wilderness for the sake of easing our own consciences and placating our [communities.]<sup>ii</sup> We cannot allow our waiting for the celebration of Christ's birth to turn into idleness, as if there are no real problems to be addressed in the weeks of wandering toward Bethlehem.

The wilderness "is exactly where God's people are – crying out from the margins where racism, oppression, and discrimination have excommunicated them. Crying out from behind the borders where profiling and bigotry have ejected them. Crying out from the confines of silence where sexual harassment and sexual violence have expelled them."<sup>iii</sup> If we do not identify ourselves among those who have been cast into the wilderness, we must find a way to speak and act such that those in the wilderness know they are not working toward the promised land on their own. We must not proclaim a message of hope and comfort that looks like the cheap promises and wishful thinking of many a televangelist today. But instead, we must speak of the comfort and hope that is the promise of the prophet, and then we must be active in preparing for the coming of God's glory. We must be agents who work to make the valleys high and the mountains low, we must be instruments of God's peace who work for justice, we must join the voices of God's heavenly chorus who sing of God's glory, for 'the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.'

One last thought: I do wonder, perhaps it's possible, our spending is indicative of our own *veiled* wilderness, in which we have found ourselves under the authority of the Benjamins, with no acceptance of our own existence in exile? Perhaps we are more akin to the wilderness wanderers than we'd like to give credence. What if we are so broken with a bent toward the love of money that we've masked our wilderness with the abundance of presents under the tree? Like the outdoor lover who can only go camping in a camper, or the backwoods hiker who uses the GPS on their phone instead of a compass and map, I wonder if our wilderness is masked by the abundance of goods stuffed in our stocking. Perhaps our wilderness experience isn't as those who have been cast out of our hometowns and into the unforeseen heartache of exile, but instead our wilderness is experienced as a loss of the joy of celebrating the presence of Christ or the presence of one another. Perhaps our wilderness is marked by the loss of family traditions of reading books and singing songs, as the traditions that make the season special are replaced with the gifts that, beloved or hated, wither as the grass and fade like the flowers.

As you celebrate this year, may you claim the eternal Word of God, which is gifted to us in the birth of Christ. For in the presence of the Word, the exiled wandering in the wilderness need to fear not, for peace has come in the glory of the Lord, that the wanderer may claim they have been found, the exile may claim they have returned home, and the faithful may receive the great reward of the Lord. May Christ be with us, wherever we wander. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, & Greg Holder. *Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

<sup>ii</sup> Karoline Lewis. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved December 6, 2017.

<sup>iii</sup> Lewis.