

The Original Christmas Gift Box

Hebrews 9:1-5; Luke 20:1-20

I come to this service well qualified for the season because my mother taught me enough to get a PhD in Christmasology before I was ten! For instance, when my brother and I were little boys, we had little Christmas elf pajamas that we were only allowed to wear one night a year. They were something out of Dickens, white and red pin stripe night shirt with a little cotton stocking hat. And she would put us in these wild jammies and then tell us to go to sleep! Because we weren't overstimulated, not us! I think I would just vibrate in my little bed waiting for the crash of Santa's sleigh when it hit my roof.

And gift security was a big thing with my mom. She was determined, on a mission, to make sure that my brother and I didn't get our grubby little hands on any presents until after dawn on Christmas morning. I remember one year I woke up to the sound of our neighbors, Jerry and Gail Brown, climbing up the stairs from the street toward our house, each of them with a red metal PF Flyer sleigh on their back. My mother had gone so far as to hide our gifts in the neighbor's garage! I think at this point my brother and I realized that my mom had won the battle of gift security!

And I'm not sure I understood her passion for Christmas trappings and gifts until I began to think about the Christmas Shoe boxes our church sends children around the world every year. A little more than a month ago, our Sunday School packed around seventy Christmas Child shoe boxes for a group called Samaritan's Purse. So these shoe boxes were filled with toys and colors, supplies and necessities to be sent around the world to children who have very little of just those things the boxes were meant to carry. The gifts were so modest as to almost be a little sad. Combs, toothbrushes, crayons, pencils, little matchbox cars, socks and baseball caps.

And the hope was that the toys and colors and all the rest will express something of the love and care that resides in God's heart and in our hearts for little children who are faraway and all too often in desperate need. Of course, the boxes reach the children in the hands of people, Christians from churches in their country, who reinforce the message of love with the words and gestures and warmth that only become possible when people meet face to face.

And I think that is something like what God meant for us to understand when he sent his own Son to become one of us and to express to us, heart to heart and face to face, just how deeply his Father cared that we were lost and in trouble in a world full of shadows and sin.

The Christmas story is by its very nature tender and sweet. The holy family arrives in the city of David with nothing in order, a woman in labor who is only just engaged, a man without a plan, far from home, knocking on strangers' doors, trying to find shelter before Mary's condition

moves from desperate to critical, all this followed by the upset and tedium of childbirth, lying in the straw in a stable.

And yet in the trouble and shadows of that night, something wonderful happens. With the birth of the child, all of heaven seems to come awake. Jesus was born with angels peering down from the sky, singing in wonder at the spectacle of Almighty God as an infant in a woman's arms, tenderly wrapped in cloth and laid in a feeding box.

The point being that, in that moment, the manger became a new and living Holy of holies, the place where God dwells, the scene where true worship can be offered, not by the high and mighty, but by shepherds who never had any reason to dream that they might ever be that near to the holiness and majesty of the Most High.

It's poignant because some thirty years later, in John's gospel, the whole exercise will be repeated beginning on the afternoon of Good Friday. Another Joseph, Joseph of Arimathea, will attend to Jesus' death about as lovingly as Joseph the Carpenter attended to his birth. Again, on Good Friday, Jesus will be wrapped in cloths and laid in a box.

And again, just like at Jesus' birth, trouble and uncertainty will be turned into wonder and glory when another Mary, Mary Magdalene, will peer into the tomb, into the box where Jesus was laid and see angels, gazing at the empty spot where Jesus once lay, wondering out loud how anyone could weep at such a wonderful sight.

So think about it! Angels peering down at the place where God dwelled, where have we seen that before? A box full of gifts that speak of the love and thoughtfulness of Someone far away? Where have we heard of such a thing? The answer is in the old tabernacle, in the Holy of Holies, there was a box where God was said to dwell, the Ark of the Covenant, hidden behind a curtain, guarded by two golden angel statues. Because after all, gift security didn't originate with my mom, it was a thing even with God way back then.

And in the box were symbols, sacred sights and colors to delight the heart, all the supplies and necessities we'll ever need to make our way through trouble and shadow all the way home to heaven. And the point of the sights and colors and symbols in the Ark was to express the promise that one day we will stand heart to heart and face to face with Jesus.

The point being that Jesus came to us, lived with us, died for us, so that one day we could go to him, be with him in a place where warmth and gestures and words from the heart will finally and perfectly express what the old symbols could only hint at.