

“CHRISTMAS GIFTS (#5):THE GIFT OF LOVE”

(Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20)

© 2008 Dr. Brian Germano

[Prop Needed: Surprise Wrapped Christmas Gift Representing Love]

[East Cobb U.M.C.; 12-24-08, Christmas Eve Meditation]

–I–

1. Lighting of Christ Candle Reading (1st Scripture Reading): Isaiah 9:2-7
Second Scripture Reading: Luke 2:1-20 and Pray.
2. [6pm Family Service Only: Drama “The Gift”]
3. [READ POEM BY JIM SWANSON...]
*“Into a world of strength and pride... A child is born, weak and humble,
Having no power – ...Except that power which alone can conquer all others: LOVE.
Such was, and is, Christmas.”*¹

A–Over 2000 years ago on that first Christmas Eve, God gave us a power greater than all other powers – a gift greater than all other gifts: ...the gift of love, in the form of a baby, Jesus.

B–And tonight, I want us to talk about this gift, and what it means for you and me today.

C–To help us do that, our worship team has prepared a surprise package for me to open which contains something representative of love. So let’s see what’s inside...

[OPEN GIFT and briefly talk about how it relates to God’s gift of “Love”...]

4. So as we think about this gift of love, I want to use tonight’s two scriptures (Isaiah 9 and Luke 2) to talk briefly about the fact that in this gift, two very important things happened.

–II–

5. First of all, the scriptures teach us that at Christmas, God **GAVE LOVE** in the form of the baby Jesus.

A–How do the scriptures put it?

1–(Tonight in) Isaiah 9:6a – “A child has been born for us, a son given to us...”

2–And in (tonight’s)Luke 2:10, the angel tells the Shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for... to you [i.e., given to you] is born this day in the city of David a Savior, the Messiah...”

3–From John 1, “In the beginning was the Word [e.g., Christ], and the Word was with God, & the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh & lived among us..” (Vss. 1 & 14).

4—And even John 3:16, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in Him might have everlasting life.*”

B—Back in 1885, songwriter Christina Rossetti summarized these scriptures in the words of one of her Christmas carol that we still sing:

*“Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas; star and angels gave the sign.”*²

C—You see, at Christmas God gave Himself as a gift so that you & I could have love in our lives.

1—And that means that the love we have for family and friends & neighbors is only made possible because in the gift of the baby Jesus, “Love Came Down at Christmas.”³

2—But you may have heard it said before, that “*A gift is not a gift until it’s received.*”

6. And to me, at least, this means that the very reason God GAVE us love at Christmas in the first place is so that an equally important *second* thing could happen: ...we could **RECEIVE that LOVE** by receiving His son.

A—Remember what the Shepherds did after they “*went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger*”?

1—Verse 20 says that “*[They] returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen...*”

2—In other words, they didn’t just go back to their “normal” routines. Instead, they went back *different*, having *received* the gift of love that God *gave* them that night.

B—How many of us, when we give a present to someone, expect that it’s NOT going to be opened? I would hope *none* of us. And yet, isn’t that what a lot of us do with God’s gift of Jesus at Christmas? ...

1—...We gather to see family and friends; we have a great meal together; we open gifts from one another; we shop and fellowship and watch football together.

2—But then too often we forget about God’s gift of Jesus. It’s like having a birthday party, and then leaving out the very one who’s birthday we’re celebrating!

C—And yet, Christmas is not just about GOD giving US a great gift, but it’s also about US receiving that gift.

1—How do the words go that we love to sing every Christmas?... “*Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her King!*”

2–Notice it *doesn't* say “*Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth look at him and say, ‘O what a cute baby! How sweet!’*” and go back to ‘business as usual.’

3–No. “*Let earth* [--and for that matter, let every one of us–] receive [him as] *King* [and Lord of our lives].”

D–You see, there’s a fundamental difference between you and I *knowing about* God’s gift of love, and you and I RECEIVING that gift – and Christmas is about the latter!

E–Perhaps that’s why several years ago, two songwriters took one of the most famous Christian songs of all time, and rewrote it into a Christmas version that goes like this:
[Sing to tune “**Jesus Loves Me**”...]

*Jesus, baby O so small, ...Crying in this cattle stall,
You are born so I can know ...God is here and loves me so!*

REFRAIN: *Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.*

*Christmas comes so I can see ...Jesus wants to live in me.
He is with me all day long, ...Good and gentle, kind and strong.*

(Please sing it with me...) REFRAIN ⁴

–III–

7. Friends, in the baby Jesus, God **GAVE** so that we could **RECEIVE**, and *that’s* the meaning of the great “Christmas Gift” of LOVE.
8. [PRAYER for Christmas Love, including prayer for people to receive Christ as their Savior]
9. [SOLO while lights dim, then Candlelighting Time with “Silent Night”]

ENDNOTES:

1. Written and shared by Rev. Jim Swanson in a Christmas Greeting with his friends and family in 1974, the year that he had a daughter born with Downs Syndrome, recounted by Rev. Richard J. Fairchild in his sermon “*Christmas Love*” (2004), cited at www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/a-ad04su.php.
2. Verse 1 of the hymn “Love Came Down At Christmas,” by Christina G. Rossetti (1885), #242 in The United Methodist Hymnal.
3. I’ve heard it said that “*Jesus did not come to make God's love possible, but to make God's love visible*” (Author Unknown, cited at www.christianstories.com/stories/funny/christianquotespart3.shtml).
Another famous story about this truth is told by Candy Chand: “*Each December, I vowed to make*

Christmas a calm and peaceful experience. I had cut back on nonessential obligations, extensive card writing, endless baking, decorating, and even overspending. Yet still, I found myself exhausted, unable to appreciate the precious family moments, and of course, the true meaning of Christmas. My son, Nicholas, was in kindergarten that year. It was an exciting season for a six year old. For weeks, he'd been memorizing songs for his school's "Winter Pageant." I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd be working the night of the production. Unwilling to miss his shining moment, I spoke with his teacher. She assured me there'd be a dress rehearsal the morning of the presentation. All parents unable to attend that evening were welcome to come then. Fortunately, Nicholas seemed happy with the compromise.

So, the morning of the dress rehearsal, I filed in ten minutes early, found a spot on the cafeteria floor and sat down. Around the room, I saw several other parents quietly scampering to their seats. As I waited, the students were led into the room. Each class, accompanied by their teacher, sat cross-legged on the floor. Then, each group, one by one, rose to perform their song. Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as "Christmas," I didn't expect anything other than fun, commercial entertainment, songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer. So, when my son's class rose to sing, "Christmas Love," I was slightly taken aback by its bold title. Nicholas was aglow, as were all of his classmates, adorned in fuzzy mittens, red sweaters, and bright snowcaps upon their heads. Those in the front row-center stage held up large letters, one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class would sing "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter C. Then, "H is for Happy," and on and on, until each child holding up his portion had presented the complete message, "Christmas Love."

The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, we noticed her; a small, quiet, girl in the front row holding the letter "M" upside down totally unaware her letter "M" appeared as a "W." The audience of 1st through 6th graders snickered at this little one's mistake. But she had no idea they were laughing at her, so she stood tall, proudly holding her "W." Although many teachers tried to shush the children, the laughter continued until the last letter was raised, and we all saw it together. A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen. In that instant, we understood the reason we were there, why we celebrated the holiday in the first place, why even in the chaos, there was a purpose for our festivities. For when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear: 'CHRIST WAS LOVE.' And, I believe, He still is" (Candy Chand, cited at www.2jesus.org/inspstories/christmaslove.html).

Although we don't have time to discuss it, it should be noted here that God not only GAVE love at Christmas, but He also TAUGHT love, as well. That is: through the gift of Jesus His son, God showed for us how we are to go about giving this same gift of love to one another, as well. Tonight's Luke text explains that after their experiencing of Jesus' birth, "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen...* (Luke 2:20) – in other words, they didn't keep their experience of love to themselves, but shared it with others. And remember when Jesus later grew up, we find him teaching us how to love, as well: John 13:34, "*I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another*"; and 1 John 4:7 says, "*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.*" In fact, how do the lyrics from Verse 2 of the famous Christmas song "O Holy Night" say it? "*Truly he taught us to love one another...*" So at Christmas, God GAVE us love, but He also TAUGHT us love.

4. Christmas version of the hymn "*Jesus Loves Me*", lyrics by Ken Bible and Anna B. Warner, Music by William B. Bradbury, © 2005 by LNWhymns.com. CCLI Song #4454317.