



Your Best Christmas Gift

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

John 1:1-5, 9-14, 16-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was the life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not over come it.

... The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood not of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the father... And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

A wife gave her husband two neckties for Christmas. He, being an obedient and peace-loving man, went immediately and put on one of the ties. He returned to the kitchen where his wife was preparing breakfast. Seeing he had one of the ties on she said, "What's the matter, don't you like the other one?"

For the last month, we tried to get ready for Christmas. We pulled out the old tree from the basement. We threw some decorations around. We strung lights and garlands and plugged in the electric Santa Claus. We bought some presents. We wrapped them in pretty paper. We remembered to say, "Merry Christmas," and "Ho-ho-ho." We sang along with the seasonal music

on the radio. We bought hams and basted turkeys and put on a big spread for the in-laws.

We even tried to get ready in church. We paid attention to the Advent Candles. We kept up our prayers. We listened to the scriptures. We might even have read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke to the children at home.

We tried to make a joyful affirmation of the birth of Jesus our Lord.

And now, it's over. It's done. It's finito. That was yesterday.

But what was it, really? What did Christmas mean, really? What did you get out of it, really?

Christmas was never our idea. Only God could have dreamed up Christmas.

John, when he wrote his gospel, never once mentioned Christmas. He ignored the birth of Jesus. He went back to the beginning.

"In the beginning," John wrote, "was the Word. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us..." That's how John approached Christmas.

If you take heed to what John wrote, you'll see that Christmas had its beginning long before Joseph and Mary made their long trek to Bethlehem.

John called Jesus the "Word." John said the Word was "with" God, way back at the beginning of time. What God was, the Word was. I think what John was getting at is that when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he was not being born as God, but as God Incarnate - God in human flesh, the Word of God in the form of a man.

This, John said, was God's ultimate attempt to love and redeem the world.

There's a fable about a king who fell in love with one of his maids. He called together all his wise counselors - all his cabinet members, his director of homeland security, his secretary of the moat, his keeper of the royal treasury. They were all there.

The king asked them a question: "How shall I declare my love?" He wanted their advice. They put their heads together and came up with a sure-fire answer. "King," they said, "what you need to do is deck yourself out in your best royal raiments. Wear the big crown and the ermine cloak. Put the eight karat emerald ring on your finger. Strap that diamond-encrusted ceremonial sword to your side. Put your royal guard in their dress uniforms, and march over to the wrong side of town. Have the guard pound on the door of her rotten, little shack. When she answers the door and sees you there, she'll fall down on her knees and beg to do whatever pleases you."

But the king didn't like that advice. He didn't want her to marry him because she was scared. He didn't want her to marry him because he was the king and all powerful. He didn't want her to marry him because it was a royal command. The only way he wanted her to marry him was because she really, truly loved him as a man, as an equal, as a partner.

So, what he did was to slip out of the castle late at night, all alone, dressed up as a servant. He crept over to her cottage and professed his love.

Now, that's a Christmas story. And that's what John said God did through Jesus Christ.

God wants you to serve him, to follow him, to love him - not because he's all-powerful and can cause you untold misery -

- but because you love him.

God doesn't want you to submit to his power; he wants you to return his love.

So, according to John, God moved in next door. He pitched a fleshly tent and arrived in the form of a baby, lying in the straw, outside in a manger, under a star. And when that baby cried his first howl, God's human voice was heard for the very first time.

That's the joy of Christmas. That's what it's all about. God has come down into this world to be one of us. God chose to be just like us. To hurt, to hope, to strive; just like us.

Through Jesus Christ, God knows the human condition, because God has been through it all. What that means is no experience of ours will ever go unattended by God.

Cradles of insecurity - he is there.

Deserts of temptation - he is there.

Gardens of indecision - he is there.

Crosses of suffering - he is there.

He's been through them all; and when we go through them, he's right there with us. That's the kind of God we got for Christmas.

Aren't you glad you opened his present first?

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." Look what came with the present: a wonderful thing called grace.

Don't you need some grace?

It is God's grace that touches the brokenness of your life, his grace that gives you strength and encouragement when you need it the most, his grace that gives you what you need and keeps you away from the things you don't need.

What's the most important relationship you've got? It's not with your husband or your wife, not with your parents, not with your boss - it is your personal relationship with your personal redeemer and Lord. You can let everything else go, but you've got to nurture your relationship with your savior.

One of the best known parables of Jesus has been retold in the language of Christmas by John Killinger. The Rev. Dr. John Killinger was the preaching professor at Vanderbilt when I went there. I never took a class from him, but I wish I had. Dr. Killinger is known as an expert when it comes to preaching. I missed out on him. He calls this parable the Gospel of Christmas.

"A certain man had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Give me my Christmas presents early this year. I am bored with this place and am splitting for the big city.'

"And the father took the presents out of the closet and gave them to him.

"And not many days after, the son packed his bag and took a long trip to the city, where he wasted all his money in an endless round of Christmas parties. He even hocked his father's presents, and soon he had spent all that, too.

"The minute he had run out of funds, doors were closed to him and the party spirit was over. In desperation, he went out and attached himself to the owner of a delicatessen, who sent him into the kitchen to wash dishes. He was so hungry that he sneaked scraps of food off the plates he was cleaning. And no one said as much as a kind word to him.

"Finally, on the day before Christmas, he came to his senses, 'How often,' he thought, 'have I seen my father set hired help down to a steaming meal at my mother's table, and I am stuck here eating this garbage! I am going to hightail it out of here and return home as fast as I can, and I will say to my father, 'Dad, you were right, it's a tough world, and I didn't make it. You don't owe it to me at all, but I would like to come home and work for you as a hired hand, if you'll have me.'"

"He turned in his apron, collected the few dollars that were coming to him and went directly to the bus station. All the Christmas lights seem to blink warmly, as if they approved what he was doing, and the Santas on the street corners blessed him on his way.

"He rode all night, rehearsing his speech as he went. 'Dad, you were right, it's a tough world... Dad, you were right,..."

“At dawn on Christmas day, the bus pulled up outside the bus stop in his little hometown, and he tumbled off, wrinkled, unshaven, and a little worried about how it would be.

“‘Son!’ a voice called. And there was his father, ‘But, Dad, how did you know?’ he stammered.

“‘How did he know?’ said the old station agent, taking the morning papers off the bus, ‘Why, he’s come down here two, three times a day, every day since you’ve been gone.’

“‘Dad,’ said the boy, ‘It’s a tough world, and you were right...’

“‘I know,’ said the father, putting an arm around the boy’s shoulders. ‘Come, let’s go home.’

“At home, he called for his wife and anybody else who was in the house and said, ‘Look who’s here! Look who’s here!’

“And he brought out presents and laid them before his son, including a beautiful new bathrobe, a pair of nice leather slippers, and a handsome, sparkling ring.

“‘Here,’ he said, putting the ring on his son’s hand. ‘Go take a nice, warm shower, and put on this robe and these slippers, and come down and we’ll have a wonderful visit.’

“‘Get out that standing rib roast we have in the freezer,’ he said to his wife. ‘And turn on the tree lights! We’re really going to have a celebration today!’”

Welcome home this Christmas. The watching is over. New life has begun. God is with you, full of grace and truth. Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift in Jesus Christ our Lord.