



CHRISTMAS JOY

SPECIAL OFFERINGS

CHURCH LEADERS—PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Sermon - 2019

The Perfect Gift

Matthew 1:18-25

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This is the season most identified with gifts and gift-giving. Gifts are always fun. Whether it is the fun of picking out a gift for a loved one, with all the imagining of their likes and their joys that goes into the selection, or the fun of receiving the well-selected gift. The extension of one's own imagination into the heart and mind of another in order to identify the perfect present that will bring them optimum joy and pleasure is a definitive act of love and care. The surprised receipt of a gift that fits us is a moment of true joy from the realization that we are known by another person so well. In this season of expectation and hope, we give gifts to demonstrate our love for one another and for others, and we do so as an expression of our own thankfulness for what we know by faith as the Perfect Gift. The story of the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew is a story of great gifts, and yet it happens in such an unlikely way.

Matthew's start to the story of Jesus' birth is simple and direct. "The birth of Jesus Christ happened like this." With that unembellished introduction, Matthew transitions from the listing genealogy that runs from Abraham to Jesus into a narrative that introduces a young woman betrothed who finds herself pregnant "from the Holy Spirit." Our interest moves from the long list of the generations of the Abrahamic line through David to arrive at this moment to a young woman in crisis. It may seem an inauspicious beginning for a story of great gifting, it is a stark introduction to the Good News of salvation. Matthew sets the opening moment in the context of ancient lineages of faithfulness. The betrothed mother-to-be stands in contrast with, as well as defined by, the long index of male ancestors, except of course for Rahab, Ruth, and "the wife of Uriah." Mary joins the three women in the preceding genealogy as a marginal woman who suddenly finds herself a central figure in the divine work.

It may hardly seem like a gift to Mary at that moment. Her life of expected marriage challenged by the unexpected movement of God. There is no prayer of the humble maidservant in Matthew, no expression of awareness that her lowly circumstances make her an unlikely one to be included in God's plan in such a central way followed by thankful submission to the divine work in her life. Mary is silent. Even her pregnancy is

announced in the passive voice, “. . . she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” By contrast, Joseph is active, Joseph is described as a righteous man who has compassion for Mary’s situation and who decides how to proceed, given the change in circumstances.

Joseph’s decision to put Mary away expresses his assumption that she has acted dishonorably and unfaithfully. The fact that he was willing to do so quietly so as not to humiliate her, even in what may have been his own hurt and anguish, says that Joseph intends to act with grace and compassion toward Mary. This attitude toward his betrothed is a gift that Joseph can provide at the moment, a gift of kindness. The angel of the Lord appearing to Joseph in a dream changes his perspective entirely and brings him into the narrative as a central player alongside his betrothed. Joseph hears the teaching of the angel of the Lord that places Mary’s pregnancy in the larger context of God’s redemptive work and names Mary as the one through whom the Savior will come.

From challenging circumstances to a gift of compassion, which gives way to a Gift of God, this is the structure of the opening to the Good News in Matthew’s Gospel. Joseph and Mary are marginal in their time when the Romans governed the land, King Herod ruled Judea, and they were simple people in the little town of Bethlehem. There are none of the trappings of power or prestige in their lives, but the dream of Joseph sets their lives in the larger context of God’s redemptive work through Israel. They submit themselves to play the part that God has provided for them.

Of course, it is Matthew’s own editorial comment that sets this story in the larger promise of divine presence. Quoting Isaiah 7:14 and appropriating the divine promise as newly meaningful in the birth of Jesus, Matthew sets his story in the vast history of God’s saving promise of presence. Presence is the mark of divine work from the ancestral stories of promise to the prophetic message to King Ahaz, and down to the moment in Matthew’s gospel when the presence of God with us is envisioned in a manner more specific and clearly defined than in any previous moment. For Ahaz, the promise of presence meant a political and military deliverance that would be indicative of God’s willingness to free him from the foreign powers that were vying for his throne and to stabilize his kingdom. It was the arena of geopolitics engulfing the little kingdom of Judah, and Isaiah’s message to Ahab, in a nutshell, was “Wait.”

In the passage preceding the lectionary reading in Isaiah, the prophet has just proclaimed a Word of God announcing about the present threat, “It shall not stand” (Isaiah 7:7). It is a significant moment for Ahaz, the conditionality of the stability of his reign turns on his own stability in his faith. The offer of a sign that opens the Old Testament reading in the lectionary provides the King with an opportunity of

confirmation that God will accomplish all the prophet announced. When King Ahaz rejects the offer of a sign, Isaiah announces God's own promise that the young child yet to be born will mark the time by when the King will know that God is indeed present with him.

But all of the action in the Old Testament reading is set in the realms of royal power and prophetic counsel. In Matthew's opening to the birth of Jesus, the location of the activity is at the margins of power, on the edges of society, in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, as though God had moved divine attention from the powerful to engage the marginal. The King who would not trust was not to be trusted with the mission to deliver the people. The presence that was promised for a King in Jerusalem, has now come to us in Bethlehem. In Jesus Christ God has come to us as one of us, bringing all the power of compassion and redemption into our world. God's presence arrives in the margins, at the edges of society, not in the halls of power or the seats of government. That is Matthew's beginning, and it changes our notions of power and prestige, it transforms our vision for how we recognize the Holy Spirit of God working in our own moments.

From the margins to the center stage is a movement that occurs regularly in the biblical narrative. Whether we think of the stories of the three women identified in the genealogy of Jesus, the story of Jesus' birth, or the many stories in the Bible that demonstrate a preference for younger over the older, lesser over greater, outsider over insider, we witness God's redemptive work energizing the marginal to great acts of faithfulness. It is clear that the social and cultural expectation that enshrines a preference for the powerful is rarely the guiding focus of narratives that describe God's saving work. It is an act of trust in God's faithfulness to see God at work in like this our own moments today.

The Perfect Gift of God is the gift of redemption through Christ Jesus, which comes to us where we are without the need for power and prestige. It is the gift of grace in each life that manifests of God's great love for us, a love that seeks us where we are and leads us to purposeful lives in which we can share our gifts with others. This season of Advent Hope, when we renew our sense of God's Perfect Gift is a time when we can recall that God is present and at work among us, coming to us where we are in our own marginal moments when we least expect it. That work is the work of the Church in society, bringing the Good News of salvation to all. One way the Church continues that work is through the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the ministries supported through corporate offerings. At this time of year, the Christmas Joy Offering is a significant opportunity for local churches to participate in the larger ministry of the Church.

This offering supports groups who may live in the margins of society but who are immensely gifted. The Christmas Joy Offerings supports three schools and colleges equipping communities of color that are important ministries providing an opportunity for marginalized groups through education and mentoring for developing purposeful and meaningful lives. It is a powerful testimony to the faithfulness of God that we find today among us so many gifted individuals who, but for the opportunity that comes with education, will barely find the paths that lead to purposeful living. Just as God entrusted innocence to humanity so long ago in the Bethlehem story, God is yet faithfully entrusting us with innocence born anew in marginal spaces. It is an important continuing ministry of the Church that we provide for the preservation and preparation of that innocence so that children who would not otherwise know opportunity can find it in agencies supported by the PCUSA Christmas Joy Offering. Programs at the three schools prepare leaders for the next generation in an environment that encourages young people to see their lives as an important chapter in the story of God's redemptive work in the world. Whether it be the Presbyterian Pan American School in Kingsville, TX, the Menaul School in Albuquerque, NM, or Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, AL, the Christmas Joy Offering supports education for students who might otherwise not have the opportunity.

Though each school was founded with a particular underrepresented people in mind, they serve students of all backgrounds and remain a steady and faithful witness to the Reformed Christian faith that each of us has a purpose to live into as the beneficiaries of God's Perfect Gift in Christ Jesus. The Presbyterian Pan American School was founded in south Texas to educate young boys and girls from Mexico. The Menaul School was founded in New Mexico to educate Spanish speaking boys, and Stillman College was founded in Alabama to educate African Americans for the Christian ministry in the Presbyterian Church. All three schools now admit students from diverse backgrounds but all with the need for education and the opportunity to develop their gifts and skills so that they can live into their full humanity as gifted by God.

The Christmas Joy Offerings also supports Honorably Retired Ministers who may need added assistance in their retirement. These individuals have spent their lives in Christian service and ministry and it is an important commitment of the Church to continue to express our thankfulness to God by offering these servants of God aid in their retirement. In either case, contributions to the Christmas Joy Offering serve the continuing ministry of the Church in important ways today. These contributions are a continuing witness to the work that God invites us to join as we make a place for opportunity, for divine presence to be manifest in lives of purpose at the margins so that they can develop their full potential as the people of God.

Matthew's story binds the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem to the prophetic announcement of God's promise to be with us in all things. The gift of a Savior born at the margins of society who comes as God with Us and opens the path to authentic life to all who will heed the call is the Perfect Gift that has ever been given. As we celebrate God's Perfect Gift of Presence through Jesus Christ in the Advent Season, may we all be generous in our support of God's continuing work through the Presbyterian Mission Agency and the Offerings that support that work. AMEN.