

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“The Gift”

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John 1:14-16

December 24, 2023; Christmas Eve Services

If you've been with us this Advent, you'll remember that we've spent a lot of time talking about seeking Christ as we get closer and closer to Advent, especially through the lens of the Magi, the wise men, on their journey to Bethlehem. Today, as we celebrate the arrival of Christ, of the Word of God made flesh, in a way we wrap up that journey, but it's also just the start. It was for the Magi—more to come on what happened to them after Bethlehem next week. But I wanted to offer a note on what we'll be looking at next, starting in two weeks.

It seems we are constantly bombarded with the pressure to become more, to improve ourselves, to achieve better and better success in whatever the arena might be: professionally, in school, in our homes, for our families, you name it. And seeking to improve isn't such a bad thing, but it can go too far. So how does the gospel of Christ speak into that pressure, even that insecurity that can gnaw at us from every side? Well, we'll be talking about that earnest in the new year, and it's an answer that is both life-giving in its simplicity but immensely challenging in its practice, because it calls into question the motives and methods we might think of in becoming “more.” If that has been something that has troubled you, in the past or even now, I hope you'll join us as we see how Christ calls us into a live of discipleship and servanthood that short-circuits all the ways we might feel inferior and instead gives life in a way that the world might not lift up so highly. We'll start that in two weeks.

Today, we come to a short passage talking about the surprising beauty of the grace that we celebrate at Christmas: of the Word made flesh, and the beauty of the gospel itself. Let's go to God's Word together. John 1: 14-16.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’ ”) From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Father in heaven, may your grace never cease to surprise us. Give us new ears to hear your Word, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Are you hard to buy for? Seems that's a perennial struggle for many a household.

Some folks are just easy to buy for. Maybe kids are at the top of the list, or at least that's how it works for us. There is no guesswork for Frances and me in what our kids might like for Christmas. Why? Well because they tell us. They tell us over and over. They tell other people over and over, and we hear about it. Not a complicated thing.

But there are other folks that are kind of like sphinxes, in that you just can't tell what they want or whether they would like this or that for Christmas or a birthday. You know who you are. I count myself among you.

My grandfather is one of those—just impossible to buy for—but he gave us an out. He had a standing request for a particular brand of peanuts and Old Spice aftershave. So for years I would try to figure out what to get everybody else, but every year, my grandfather would get a fresh new bottle of Old Spice aftershave, and I considered it a job well done.

But even though it was just what he asked for, I do wonder whether it got old. If he unwrapped a package in that familiar size to discover yet another bottle of aftershave, no doubt he was grateful, but would it feel a bit ho-hum? Not that he was ever rude. I don't imagine any of us hard-to-buy-for folks are ever rude about gifts we might receive. If it's a pair of socks, or a new shirt, it's a sincere thank you, but we're not taken aback by the thoughtfulness of the gift or anything.

But every so often, can a gift pierce through?

That happened to me last year. Bit of background. For years I have slept with a fan right next to my head. Remnant of college days I suppose, when there was an incentive to have some kind of white noise going to drown out, say, other noises. And it did the trick then. Trouble is, I can't sleep in silence anymore, nor is it easy for me to sleep without air moving on my head. At home, no big deal. Just have a fan right next to the bed. Gets a bit trickier when traveling, though. So when staying at a hotel or with family, I've learned the hard way that I have to bring that bulky fan with me, taking up half a suitcase it seemed like, if I want anything resembling a good night's sleep.

But last year, without my asking for it, I got a present from my sister and brother-in-law, and it was, lo and behold, a travel fan. (Odd that I hadn't put two and two together and gotten one before.) But not just a small fan, but a rechargeable one that could run all night without needing to be plugged in. And I remember getting it and being taken aback, realizing, this is just what I need.

Sometimes a gift, even for the hard-to-buy-for, can pierce through.

For how many of us has Christmas become familiar? Nothing wrong with familiar. The rhythms of carols and candles and any other traditions we might have as a church or within your

families, those can be real good things, sources of comfort and cheer in this season. But you do them every year, and they can become so familiar that maybe they lose their impact, and they might especially lose their impact in terms of the message they all carry: this momentous, miraculous declaration that the Word was made flesh, that God came to dwell among us, to be with us, to save us.

We read those words from John's Gospel: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Maybe you've heard those words before, maybe you haven't, but the general message of Christmas, of Christ born, lying in a manger, I would guess is familiar to you, even if church hasn't been something you've done all that much.

And we can hear it so much that like a bottle of Old Spice aftershave, it's a gift that perhaps we hear and, though we're grateful and appreciative, it can kind of feel ho-hum, can't it?

When really it should be something that floors us. Hear how John describes it later: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." That phrase there, "grace upon grace": grace is a gift, an unmerited gift, but it's as if John is doubling down. Grace, which is awesome, isn't just a cordial gift, but something astonishing, "grace upon grace."

So can the gift of this season pierce through for us, beyond all the rhythms and familiarity, can the grace of the manger still capture us in awe and wonder?

As we've talked about the Magi this Advent, we've looked especially at how the signs that led the Magi, in particular the star in the sky that led them to Bethlehem, were things that interrupted what was normally happening. It was as if creation itself was declaring across all frequencies that something amazing was happening, and these Magi saw it and followed it.

And we've asked what that might be for each us? Could be something joyful. It was just this time a year ago, right before Christmas, when Frances and I found out we were going to have another baby, and that stopped us in our tracks at the promise and hope of a new birth.

Or, it could even be something not perhaps joyful, but powerful nonetheless.

As a church, perhaps especially this year, we have been impacted by the loss of some cherished church members: friends, spouses, parents. And every loss hits. But some losses seem to hit a bit harder. I think that's happened for us this December.

As many of you know, our family felt that as well, with the passing of my father just over two weeks ago after a somewhat surprising, rapid decline. It has stopped us in our tracks, stopped me in my tracks, for that matter. And as we've been talking about the grace of the season and as I've been considering how it might speak, not to me as a pastor, but as a son, as a grieving son, it has posed a challenging question for me: can loss, can grief still somehow be a way that God shows us the grace of this season in an astonishing way.

The choir offered an anthem earlier. “Let the Stable Still Astonish.” Some may remember this same piece from our Choir Christmas Concert earlier this month, or from a couple of weeks back when they offered it again during Sunday worship. And when I asked Andrew if we might include that again on Christmas Eve, his first thought was, “Do you think folks would get tired of hearing it for a third time?” And I was like, “No, I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

But did you hear some of the words in that song? Maybe go back and listen to it, and listen for these words: “Who would have said: ‘Yes, Let the God of all the heavens and earth be born here, in this place?’ Who but the same God who stands in the darker, fouler rooms of our hearts and says, ‘Yes, let the God of Heaven and Earth be born here—in this place.’”

Did you hear that? “Who but the same God who stands in the darker, fouler rooms or our hearts.” The message of the song is in the title: Let the Stable Still Astonish, let that which might be so familiar because we’ve heard it so much still have the capacity to pierce through. And it’s not just an arms race of being cheerier and cheerier with more and more jingle bells to go along with it. But it’s precisely the God who stands in the darker, fouler rooms of our hearts who declares this good news: that he is with us.

I remember the room I was in when my sister and I had our last conversation with our father. Hospice had been called in, and he was in bed. The light was lower, and by that point communication and responsiveness was becoming more difficult. But two nights before he died, my sister and I gathered around his bed, and he rallied, it seemed. And we were able to share and reminisce, and affirm our love for him, and he for us. And talked as well of the hard times our relationship had endured in the past.

The next day, his ability to converse had become much more limited, if at all, and so very quickly I realized just how much of a gift that last conversation with him was to me. A sign of hope in a dark room, and it was and will remain something very precious to me, all the more now even in a time of grief.

Friends, the good news of this season, I pray, I hope, is something that will still capture you with wonder. It is not the surface level familiar cheer that sometimes can distract from the season. It is the declaration that the Eternal God of Heaven and Earth says, “I will come into the darker, fouler rooms of our hearts,” and I will be with you. And whether a sign of that astonishment is a joyful one this year—the birth of a child, the joy of time together—or a more challenging one—the grief and loss of a loved one—may all of it point to the sign that God was and is and will be with you, a gift above all gifts, grace upon grace, Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.