



Matthew 1:18-23
A Very Different Christmas
The Father's Gift

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Without a doubt, Christmas is all about the Gifts. We spend several weeks considering just the right gifts to give each person on our list: parents, kids, grandkids, maybe aunts and uncles or nieces and nephews depending on your family size and culture. For you gals who are married, undoubtedly throughout the year you listen to your husband, and observe what's going on in his life, and give considerable thought to what gift or gifts you give him so that when he opens it, he knows that you love and care for him deeply. And you husbands, certainly you go out and buy something lovely for your wife as well and you plan for it *months* in advance, buy it *several weeks* in advance, wrap it beautifully and carefully and it's the *first gift* under the tree...right? *Certainly* you wouldn't buy her gift on December 24th and stick it in a brown paper bag closed up with duct tape...would you?

So whether you're a planner or a last minutes shopper, Christmas is all about the gifts. And I think regardless of which camp we each fall in – long-range planner or last minute shopper – we do want to give good gifts. We want the receivers of the gifts we give to appreciate the gift and we want and the gift to be representative of our relationship with them.

So Christmas is all about the gifts. Why is that so? Why don't we give gifts at another holiday? Why do we give gifts at Christmas? **We give gifts because Christmas began with a first gift from our Heavenly Father.** And that gift led to some other gifts that were brought by 3 wise guys. And then at that point it's a tradition. ☺ And so in this Advent sermon series we're going to be looking at the key gifts that are given at Christmas. The gifts that God gives, and the gifts that we give.

Now, in the book, "A Very Different Christmas" (pick up a copy in the lobby as I mentioned last week) Rico Tice sets up kind of an interesting idea about celebrating Christmas in heaven, in the presence of God in God's living room. Here's how he puts it: "I want you to imagine that it's Christmas morning, and you've been invited to an amazing living room to open presents. It's not yours, nor is it your relatives'. It's heaven's. As you go in,

you see the tree, with presents underneath. And in this celestial living room is you, and God [Father, Son, and Holy Spirit]. And it's with this God in his heavenly living room that you're spending Christmas Day this year. It's a very different place to visit for Christmas. And there are some gifts, under the tree. It turns out that Christmas, even in heaven, is all about the presents – the presents under the Trinity's tree. So there you are, in heaven's living room with God on Christmas Day, and God the Father says, *Let me go first. I'm going to give my gift, and it's for...and he looks in your direction...you.* And you're thinking, *Well, what's God going to give me for Christmas? What's he got for me? He's the all-powerful, all-knowing God, he can give me anything!*"ⁱ

What would you want? A new job or a new home? How about a Tesla Cybertruck? 😊 Maybe you wish you could spend Christmas with a loved one who has passed away. Maybe you'd want world peace, the eradication of ongoing hunger or disease...or a different outcome in the Apple Cup next year? Take a moment, and share with a person next to you what you would want for Christmas if God could give you anything...

So your Heavenly Father could give you *anything*. And what does He give you? **He gives you a baby.** A baby!! Is that what you told your neighbor you wanted? Probably not! And we're not the first ones to say, "I don't think I want that gift right now!" In fact, the people God used to bring this baby into the world, and were therefore also the first recipients of the gift of this baby, did NOT want a baby for Christmas. You might say that they didn't even know Christmas was on the calendar! Mary and Joseph are minding their own business, getting ready for the wedding day, helping out with the family farm or business or whatever, living in sexual purity in their engagement, following Jewish religious practices and maintaining their relationship with God...for instance we read in verse 19 that Joseph was a righteous man, which means he walked with God and lived according to the wisdom of the Old Testament (NIV translates it more like that) about how to live rightly... So they're going about life like any engaged Jewish couple in Israel in their time would have, and God gives them this unexpected and unwanted gift of a baby from their Heavenly Father that is conceived by the Holy Spirit.

They are the first recipients of this gift that God gives us, and it's *not* what they wanted for Christmas that year! In their day and culture, because the faith community and the community at large were one and the same (especially in smaller towns like where they were from), they had a cultural value of marriage before having kids; it was not a “good look” to be expecting a child when you were not married. It's why Joseph first thought to divorce Mary because he presumed she'd been unfaithful, but he didn't want to embarrass her so at first he was going to divorce her “quietly.” To use the word “divorce” for an engaged couple might sound wrong/strong to our ears, but for them the engagement was that strong of a bond and commitment. So he was going to quietly call off the wedding plans because of the shame and embarrassment of the pregnancy.

So this gift from their Heavenly Father was not on their radar screen. “Baby” was not on their Amazon Wish List. But sometimes gifts are like that – especially from a parent to a child, right? I can still remember gifts I got from my parents that were not necessarily what I wanted, but turned out to be gifts that I needed. The one that stands out to me the most is when my dad – or maybe it was my mom and dad together, but I kind of think of this as coming from my dad – he gave me my first razor as a Christmas gift. I think I was in the 3rd grade. Just kidding...maybe my sophomore or junior year in High School. It was a Remington electric razor. I don't remember exactly what my reaction was, but I'm sure there was a tinge of embarrassment and chuckles at the thought of shaving. It was not a gift I was expecting or really even wanted. Some of you are probably wondering if my current razor works properly and if I need my dad, or my wife, to get me a new one this Christmas. Trust me: it's not the razor; it's the owner/operator.

So sometimes we give, or receive, gifts that aren't what's expected. Why? **Because – for example, when we're the recipient – these gifts meet a need that we might not even realize we have.** Or at least: that we want to pretend we don't have. Sometimes we buy into the lie that ignorance is bliss. Either way, thank God when people in our lives help us face reality and see a need we have in our lives, and see that a solution has been given to us.

And that's exactly why our Heavenly Father gave a baby at Christmas: we

have a need, and He wanted to give us a gift to meet that need. We find out more about this baby and its connection to our needs with his two names that are mentioned here. The first name is Jesus. **This name (Jesus) is important and tells us something about this gift: that he will save his people from their sins.** The name Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which is a Hebrew name. It means, “The Lord saves.” And in Joseph’s dream, the angel tells him that this is what Jesus will do, and specifically, will save people from their sins. So there’s something special about this baby who is to be called Jesus. He has a mission and a purpose about his life that is already articulated before he’s born. It’s not a mission for himself so much as it is for others – for people like you and me. Whether we recognize it or not, we need saving from our sin. Our sin gets in the way of our relationships – with other people and with God. And we need to be lifted up out of the muck and mire of our sin and its consequences so that we can live rightly in relationship with other people and also with God. That’s what Jesus does.

Secondly, we see that this baby is also called “Immanuel” which means “God with us.” This is not the name that he most commonly is called, of course; but nonetheless, this name tells us something about this baby that the Father gives: that in this baby, God is with us. It’s a fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14 that Matthew, the gospel writer, points out for us. And one thing this does that Rico Tice writes about in his book, is that this gives us clarity. **The gift of Jesus, Immanuel, gives us clarity about who God is.** In this baby, and even more so as he grows into a man, we see with clarity who God is. We don’t have to guess, “Is there a God?” or wonder what he’s like. We have clarity on that.

Through this gift, we also gain clarity about whether or not there is anything more beyond the created realm. Is there anything else? Is there an eternal realm? As Rico Tice points out in his book, “The [French] atheist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once said: ‘**There comes a time when one asks, even of Shakespeare, even of Beethoven, “Is that all there is?”**’”ⁱⁱ This is part of the human condition, that what “wows” us and inspires us eventually just satisfies us and some time after that we’re not often even satisfied with it. Even Shakespeare and Beethoven begin to wear out over time...or if that’s not your cup of tea, then Broadway Musicals and Metallica...or Van Gogh

and the Seahawks...or pick whatever it is that represents the best of whatever you enjoy: Eventually you start to ask, “Is that all there is?”

And Immanuel, God with us, gives us clarity on that question in the very big picture, ultimate kind of way: Is there a God, and if so, what’s He like? Is there more than what we see? **This gift, this baby, tells us that “yes!” there is something more: there is an eternal realm; there is a God who has created everything and He has come to us in this gift He has given.** He gives us clarity on these things. It’s like a “divine ‘Yes!’” meeting our greatest need and answering our deepest questions in this gift of a baby. We see this in the angelic announcements at his birth, and we see it throughout his life that gives meaning to this gift: we see it in the life of Jesus as he fulfills Old Testament prophecies, we see it in His miracles, we see it in his teachings, we see it in his death and resurrection, we see it in the first disciples who persevered through persecution in the early church, we see it in lives completely and radically transformed – saved from sin – by Jesus. We see it in the growth of Christianity from the birth of a baby to a movement that should have died when its leader did to the world-wide faith movement that it is today.

And it all began with the gift of a baby. It was not the gift anyone expected or thought they needed. Maybe you question whether it’s a gift you expect or need as well. Maybe it’s not something you’ve thought a whole lot about at Christmas. I mean, with all the lights, flying reindeer, Santa, Christmas trees, elves, Christmas cartoons with talking snowmen, and the absolute bombardment of advertising about all the material things you can get and give at Christmas...It’s so easy to get distracted from the true meaning of Christmas.

What we don’t want to forget, however, is the gift that really matters: the gift that started it all. Your Heavenly Father could have gotten you anything. Anything. And he’s given a gift that isn’t purchased at the last minute on an Amazon Prime account. He’s given you and me a thoughtful, long-planned for gift; something that’s very near and dear to him. He gave us a baby, His one and only Son, who brings clarity about God and eternity. Through this gift he’s telling us loud and clear about himself and eternity and

how much you mean to Him: you are loved by your heavenly father...that he values you and cares for you. So, whether you're a long-time Christian or only know a little about Jesus, be sure to open that gift this Christmas. After all, Christmas is all about the gifts, and the first Christmas gift ever given is the most important one – and you don't need to be in the heavenly living room to open it; you can do so any time this Christmas wherever you are. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Rico Tice, "A Very Different Christmas: What Are You Hoping For This Year?" p. 8-11.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 16.