



Jesus' Birth Narratives  
A Very Different Christmas  
One Question

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The last four Sundays we have been in an Advent Sermon series that has gotten its shape from a little book titled, “A Very Different Christmas: What Are You Hoping For This Year?” And in this book, Rico Tice, the author, asks us to imagine that we are in the heavenly living room on Christmas day, exchanging gifts with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So we’re imagining that we’re there, sitting in front of the Trinity’s Christmas Tree, and each week we’ve looked at a different gift. So really: **This series has been about God, you, and four presents.**

God the Father’s gift is to you; and His gift is a baby, Jesus, who gives you clarity about who God really is and what He’s like. Jesus’ gift is to the Father and it is the gift of righteousness – a life lived perfectly in tune with His heavenly Father’s will...but it’s also a gift that benefits us when we give our gift. Our gift is to the Father as well, and it’s the gift of faith. And that faith has two components: believing in Jesus and his gift of righteousness and that God sees us as righteous when we believe...and actually living out that belief which is really what faith is. Anyone can believe a parachute will work, but it takes faith to step out of the plane with the parachute on your back. So our gift is faith: living out our belief in Jesus.

The fourth gift we looked at is the gift that the Holy Spirit gives, and it is the gift of reality. In *The Matrix*, Neo takes the red pill that Morpheus offers and has his eyes opened to deeper truths. Similarly – without taking any pills from strangers in dark sunglasses – the Spirit helps us see and understand the deeper truths of life: who we are beneath the shiny, polished exterior of decency...and the Spirit opens up our eyes to the reality of God: that God knows us, loves us, forgives us, and is with us. The Spirit helps us see and comprehend those realities.

So tonight we wrap this up. And as I was thinking about this message, and these gifts we’ve been looking at the last few weeks, I thought about the gifts that we see in Jesus’ birth narratives. The most famous gifts, of course, are brought by the three wise guys – gold, frankincense...I mean, frankincense,

and myrrh. Actually, we don't know how many wise men there were, but the tradition has associated one guy with each gift. So those are obvious gifts.

But there are other, less tangible gifts. For instance, the shepherds' presents were: their presence. Which sounds really confusing if you can't read it. So here it is: **The Shepherds' presents were: their presence.** Just being there. When the angel of the Lord first appeared to them, they were terrified. We might find this surprising, but there are a lot of things in life that cause fear and there's really no good reason for the fear: spiders, the dark, the furnace in the basement of your parents' home, and so forth.

But then the angel tells them not to be afraid, and that the Savior has been born in Bethlehem. So this is good news! And so the Shepherds headed off to see Jesus. How many of you did Christmas shopping today? That's pretty last-minute. Have you ever bought a Christmas gift on the way to the Christmas gathering (maybe not Christmas day, but an office party, etc.)? That's what the shepherds would've had to do. They didn't have a year to plan for this – they have an excuse, unlike us. We know Christmas coming ever December 25<sup>th</sup>. You have a year to figure out what you're going to give next Christmas. ☺ They just found out. They didn't have time to plan. So they just showed up, and that was their gift. Their presence was their gift.

**The person who owned the property where Mary and Joseph stayed gave a gift: It was the gift of a place to stay.** The “Innkeeper” has gotten a bad rap over the years for not finding room for them in the Inn – and yet the word “innkeeper” doesn't actually appear anywhere in the birth narratives. We've assumed his or her presence based on how this word for “guest room” or “inn” got translated. And as we've looked at in previous years, and you may recall, that word is actually better translated as “guest room” as we read it tonight (NIV translation). There's another word that more commonly means “Inn” as in “hotel”, and Luke uses it later on in his gospel account, when Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. So Luke knew the word, and if he had really meant here that there wasn't any room at the Inn, he would have used that word.

Additionally, because they were returning to Joseph's home town –

Bethlehem – for the census as mandated by the Roman Government, there would have been plenty of relatives’ homes where he and Mary could have stayed; no Inn was needed. But undoubtedly they had lots of other family coming from out of town as well. So the *guest room* of the relative whose house they went to was already taken by someone...maybe one of Joseph’s cousins or an aunt and uncle or grandparents... who knows. But the homeowner welcomed them in and said, “Hey, there’s no guest room available, but we can find room for you. It’s here where our animals normally stay, but as you know, it’ll work in a pinch.” And from archaeological digging, we know that home construction then had the animals’ space connected to the homes. In fact, their feeding troughs were on the floor of the living room, while they stood a couple steps down in their own area. So that gift of space was a real treasure. They were as hospitable as they could be.

So we see a variety of different gifts in the birth narrative. Some are tangible objects like the wise guys brought...but some of them are different: the gift of just “being there” and the gift of a place to stay, of hospitality...And it’s easy to see that the gift of relationship and conversation and support in the midst of a baby being born might also have been given. There are a number of gifts that were given here, and most of them didn’t cost any money.

**And that’s kind of like the gift that God offers at Christmas as well – it isn’t tangible. It can’t be bought.** You can’t touch, taste, or smell it. Because of that, we have a hard time valuing God’s gifts. We’re all about the gifts that we have to buy – clothing, jewelry, tickets to an event, household items, and so forth. But really, aren’t the best gifts usually less tangible? Like the gift of relationship? The gift of time together? Think about this: No one who loses a loved one wishes they had more “stuff” from that person...they wish they had more time with that person. Right? Anyone who lost a loved one this past year (as we have) isn’t saying, “Gee, I sure miss their presents under the tree.” No. We miss their presence with us. We miss them.

Or maybe not. Maybe all the people in your life are dirty rotten scoundrels, and you don’t really like spending time with them. ☺ I sure hope not. Probably we all have someone in our life – deceased or someone who’s alive – where the gift we’d really like is simply more time together with that

person.

And that is really the gift that God offers at Christmas. **All the gifts that we've looked at these last few weeks show us that at the root of them is the gift of time with God.** Or maybe better stated, is that the lead to time with God. Time here on earth as we walk by faith, and time with God in eternity because of God's gift of "himself with us" in Jesus and because of Jesus' righteousness. And it's the Spirit's gift of seeing reality that helps us to recognize all of this and see the gifts being offered.

So God's gift, in the end, is really a gift of himself with us. It's not a tangible gift. You can't buy it. Not even Amazon sells "time with God" or "relationship with God." We can't put a price tag on that gift. But God has that covered, and it's the gift he offers. And that leaves us with one question to ask: **What will you do with this gift God gives you?** His heart's desire is to spend time with you – so much so, that he has made it his gift to you. He's paid for it, he's delivered the gift, he's made it possible...he's done everything he can to get this gift to you. What will you do with it?

I've given gifts before – and probably you have, too – that were opened and then seriously under-utilized. Toys, clothes, jewelry, mp3 players...I mean, last year, I got my kids a bunch of movies on VHS and they haven't watched a single one. Actually...I didn't get them that gift. But if I had: it would've been pretty funny...and the videos would have gone un-watched. And when a gift goes unused, my response (unless it's a joke gift) is usually: "I thought that would be a good gift. I guess I don't know them quite like I thought I did."

But here's the thing: **God's gift of time with Him is the perfect gift for you.** He knows you better than you know yourself. He's created you in His image! He's not going to make a mistake on the gift He gives you. So it's the perfect gift and only He can give it. No one else can give this gift. You can't even give it to yourself, like you do with other gifts under the tree. Any of you do this, where you buy the gift or help buy it and it's under the tree from someone to you? I know there's one gift under our tree where I bought it, tried it on, I know it fits...and said, "Here, sweetie, wrap this and put it under

the tree as a gift to me.” Are we the only people who do that with at least a couple gifts?

But: We can’t do that with God’s gift! Only He can give it to us.

So: **What will you do with this gift that God gives you?** Will you accept it and open it and live by faith? Will you live each day, trusting in the Good News that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds? It’s not something to be terrified and run from, but to embrace and run toward! Will you come to Jesus the way the Wise men did and offer what you can? Will you make room for him the way the homeowner did? Will you come to him and offer the gift of yourself, your presence with him, as the shepherds did? I hope so. Those are the ways we show God that indeed, we have received this gift that he gives. It’s a wonderful gift. *No one else can offer you what God offers you this Christmas: this gift of time spent with him, here, now, and forever more.* That’s his gift to you. It’s the perfect gift he gives, because he knows you: He created you in His image, He desire to be with you now and in eternity. His gift of time together is timeless. Whether you’ve opened that gift before or not, be sure to receive God’s gift to you this Christmas. When you do: it will make this...a very different Christmas. Let’s pray...Amen.