

THE GIFT HAS ARRIVED

A Christmas Eve Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson
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It was about 38 years ago that my family sent a box filled with Christmas presents to my grandparents living in Scottsdale, Arizona. We had done this every year in December for several years, but something happened that year. The box never arrived. UPS let us down, they lost the box and it was never found. I assume my grandparents looked forward to our box. Before my grandpa had a heart attack and retired and they moved to Arizona, the two of them spent every Christmas day at our house in Mayfield Village. Receiving our box helped them feel as though we were with them. It's not like there was anything of great value – just a few homemade and some specially chosen, purchased items. But it was a disappointing Christmas for my grandparents who were left waiting for gifts that never arrived, and for my family who was left waiting for our gifts to be received and enjoyed.

For almost four weeks now, we have been anticipating the arrival of a gift. We waited and prepared, and we lighted a new candle around the Advent wreath each week until finally all four candles were lighted just yesterday morning. Unlike my grandparents all those years ago who were left anticipating and waiting for a gift that never arrived, we are not left disappointed. I proclaim to you that the gift has arrived! It is a gift like no other and the value is immeasurable. Those who are ready and able to receive the gift will possess a treasure that grows more valuable with time and eternity. Tonight, our problem is not a gift that never arrives. Our problem is that gifts are not always warmly received.

If honest, we have to admit that it is not always easy for us to accept a gift. Sometimes it is awkward because of who gives it to us. Sometimes it is difficult, because it is just not what we exactly wanted. It is that time of the year for the giving and receiving of gifts, but if honest, many of us would have to admit that there have been gifts in the past that when opened disappointed us. For example, have you ever given clothes as a gift to a 6 year old boy? I did it only once to my nephew. The very apparent look of disappointment on his face convinced me that I would not be doing that again until he got older.

Of course, we adults are usually better at hiding our disappointment, but we have all received gifts that were not what we expected. There have been gifts that we really didn't need, and gifts that were not even close to our taste. We do our best to graciously accept the gift. After all, we do appreciate the thoughtfulness, but inside we're thinking, "What were they thinking. What am I going to do with this!" The disappointment is hidden, but it is still very real.

For many years, the people of Israel waited and prayed for the coming of a Messiah. Fortunately, the people were not left waiting for a gift that never arrived. God promised Israel a Messiah, and God was faithful to that promise. However, when God's gift arrived, it was not quite what people expected, and so many pushed the gift aside; they rejected it. In fact, most were not even polite about rejecting the gift. They were disappointed because God's gift had not arrive as expected. Whoever heard of such nonsense as a stable and a manger and dirty shepherds? Jesus birth was so controversial for most people, that they just couldn't accept it. They wanted nothing to do with the gift.

What has become a lovely story for us was a bunch of nonsense to many who lived 2,000 years ago. Not many were willing to take a chance on a baby, born to poor, homeless parents. They were looking for someone with power and influence, someone who could transform their powerlessness, who could change their circumstances in life. They wanted someone who could defeat the government that lorded over them and oppressed them. If it wasn't for our romanticizing of Jesus' birth over the past two thousand years, we, who are most often impressed by outward appearances, would likely have a hard time receiving God's gift as well.

Not only was God's Son not born like a Messiah, like someone of importance, he did not act or die like a Messiah. Even as we celebrate Jesus' birth, we must remember his spirit of servanthood and we must anticipate the agony of his death. It was an enormous obstacle to those who lived in the first century to believe that the Messiah who was to deliver Israel from her enemies would ever stoop to wash someone else's feet or would ever die like a common criminal on a cross. Even as we celebrate the joyous yet humble birth of the King of kings, God is calling us to look to the Messiah who lived not the life of a king, but the life of a servant, and who offered us his own life on our behalf.

Well, the gift has arrived; he is wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. But that's not all, if we actually receive the gift and look closer, we will also see that he is carrying a basin of water and wearing a crown of thorns. It is a lot easier to digest if we could simply look at and enjoy God's gift from a distance, but not actually receive it personally. After all, the gift is beautifully wrapped in the form of a precious baby, and we do so love to hold and smile at little babies. The problem is all that other stuff that came later. And yet, it is impossible to separate servanthood and sacrifice from the baby.

This gift is not exactly what most of us expected on this lovely evening of celebrating Jesus' birth. When looking at the whole picture, the gift is not exactly what we want on a night like this. Perhaps we are even a little disappointed deep down inside, although we would never admit it. To accept

the gift of God's son is hardly sentimental. It is life changing, and that may not be what most of us want on a traditional night like this.

If you don't want anything life-changing for Christmas, you might decide it best to not receive God's gift – put it aside, store the gift in a big dusty box with all those other gifts that weren't quite what you expected. In all honesty, Jesus did not look as expected, act as expected, or even die as expected. But in the wisdom and love of God he did far more for us than we ever could have imagined. It all began on a night like this. God offers to us his gift of love and salvation, God sends us a Messiah. The gift has arrived! Will you receive the gift and allow the gift to change your lives?

EVENING PRAYER...