

“Christmas Wrappings”

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2024

Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

My colleague Karl Travis, formerly the pastor at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Worth, Texas, tells of the time that his church decided to do an outdoor nativity, with real animals, for Christmas.

He says that they immediately realized they would need a special, one-time insurance rider for the occasion. So the church administrator called the insurance agent. And the agent called the underwriter.

And the underwriter was hesitant.

He did not think it was a very good idea for a church to have an outdoor nativity with live animals.

But it was too late to pull the plug.

Plans were already in place.

Publicity was circulating.

Why was the underwriter so hesitant?

Apparently, he had been down that road before: for another church on a previous Christmas, during a live nativity that he had insured, a camel BIT one of the children!

So, in order to get the necessary insurance, Karl had to promise:

No camels!

They substituted a llama instead...¹

Let me just pause right here and say:

We are NEVER doing a live nativity at Westminster.

¹ The Reverend Dr. Karl Travis, “Insurance for the Nativity,” in Who’s in Your Window: Sermons that Matter, Parson’s Porch Books, 2018.

Not a chance that I'm willing to take, even WITH insurance to back it up.

Look, you know me.

I'm not big on taking unnecessary chances, especially on Christmas Eve. It's why, for example, we have 7 fire extinguishers strategically placed throughout the sanctuary and atrium and narthex. If someone's hair catches on fire during Silent Night, we'll be ready...you think I'm joking, this really happened here a couple years ago!

Mitigate the risk, right?
Can't be too careful on Christmas Eve.

Except, of course, that's exactly the OPPOSITE of what God did long ago.

The reason all of us are here tonight is that long ago, God took a chance with God's love, and threw caution to the wind.

God did not arrive as a person born into privilege.
God came as a helpless and vulnerable child, born to a poor family, living under the thumb of Roman military might!

THAT'S the story that we just heard from Luke.

Put another way, the Son of God did not enter the world as a powerful ruler, but as a helpless receiver. A receiver of his family's love. A receiver of Mary and Joseph's care and teachings. A receiver of the Jewish faith and traditions.

Before he was doing anything else, Jesus was RECEIVING.

All of which just might have something to teach us, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord.

Do you know what it's like to be a receiver?

We often describe Christmas as the season of giving, but I think it's deeper meaning is found in receiving.

I'm not talking about presents under the tree.

I'm not talking about acquiring things or consuming things.

I'm talking about receiving a gift that you did not ask for, and could not give yourself.

I've told some of you this before.

When I was just starting out in ministry, it was the spring of 1998, and I moved from Michigan to Dallas, to begin working at a church in one of Dallas's suburbs.

Now I knew next to nothing about Dallas...

I knew about the Cowboys.

And I knew about J.R. Ewing.

And that was about it.

A month before I moved, I visited Dallas to look for an apartment. I was told where to find a few good places, but I still managed to get lost.

No GPS back in those days...so I parked my car in a random parking lot, pulled out a map, started flipping pages.

There was a man with a pickup truck parked a few spots away. He saw me, got out of his truck, and offered to help.

Having just moved from up north, I wasn't used to the outfit this gentleman was wearing: cowboy hat, big boots, jeans that were about two sizes too small, and a belt buckle that looked about THREE sizes too big.

But he was kind—he pointed me in the right direction.
Then he asked where I was from.

I told him Michigan.
He asked why I was moving to Dallas.
I told him I had a new job.
He asked doing what.

I said I was one of the pastors at a nearby church.

Then his eyes got REAL BIG, and he was clearly excited, and he raced back to his truck and pulled something out and came back and handed it to me.

What he handed me was a cassette tape.
He said he was a Christian singer in his spare time.
Since I was a pastor, he thought I might want a copy of his recordings.

I looked down at the cassette—and I'll never forget the title:
"Two-Stepping on the Devil."

It wasn't exactly the gift I was looking for...
But there are gifts that we're looking for, right?
Gifts that some of you here tonight may be desperate for...

A gift of healing, when illness has surprised you.

A gift of hope, when loss is overwhelming you.

Do you know what it's like to need a gift you cannot give yourself?

I wonder if any of you are familiar with the actor Bryan Cranston.

Cranston is best known for his role in the tv series, *Breaking Bad*, but you've probably seen him in other roles through the years...maybe Dr. Tim Whatley from *Seinfeld* rings a bell for some of you.

When the legendary radio announcer for the Los Angeles Dodgers, Vin Scully, died a couple of years ago, Bryan Cranston spoke publicly about his love for Vin Scully.

He described why Mr. Scully meant so much to him.

Cranston grew up in California, and he had a difficult childhood.
Absent father.
Alcoholic mother.

But no matter what was going on, from spring through the early fall, he always had the Dodgers to listen to...or to be more precise, during a Dodgers game, he always had Vin Scully to listen to...and no matter what awfulness the young Cranston was dealing with, when he heard the voice of Vin Scully...all was well.²

It made him feel safe.

It made him feel secure.

It was a gift he could not give himself...

² I heard Bryan Cranston interviewed on "Flippin' Bats with Ben Verlander." I am indebted to a sermon by Alan Dyer preached on Easter, 2023 for making me aware of this interview.

Do you see what we're talking about tonight?
Being a receiver, dependent on someone else to give you what you need...it's not just an embarrassing thing or a fearful thing.

It can be a life-changing thing.

So let me invite you to do something.

Consider the most vulnerable, helpless, hurting place in your heart right now—that place where you are desperate for something you cannot give yourself...and then take another look at Luke's Christmas story.

What is the gift that Luke says we receive at Christmas?
Let me get at it like this.

I once had a beloved, long-time member of a former church come through the line on Christmas Eve, and she was not in the Christmas spirit! She didn't say, "Merry Christmas," and she didn't shake my hand. She asked me where the swaddling clothes were.

I had no idea what she was talking about.

But she went on to inform me that she grew up listening to the King James version of Luke's Christmas story, in which Mary wraps the baby Jesus not with "bands of cloth" but in "swaddling clothes."

The version you heard tonight went like this:
"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth..."

The King James goes like this:
"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes..."

This church member told me in no uncertain terms that Christmas was not Christmas unless Jesus was placed in the manger wrapped in the King James Version of Christmas, in swaddling clothes!

Let me just say it didn't FEEL like a gift when she was telling me all this after Christmas Eve worship. But in an indirect way, she helped me see something I had never noticed in this story before.

If you read on in Luke's Gospel, in chapter 23, when Jesus is crucified and taken down from the cross, do you remember what Joseph of Arimathea wraps Jesus' body in?

A linen cloth. Bands of cloth.
Listen to the echo...

The Christmas story: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger..."

The Easter story: "Then he took [the body] down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in rock-hewn tomb..."

Do you hear the parallel?
Do you see what's happening here?

In the birth of Jesus, Luke is foreshadowing the death of Jesus.

Where was Jesus born?
Bethlehem...which means, does anyone know?
House of bread.

Wrapped in bands of cloth at his birth—
and placed in a manger,
which is literally a feeding trough.

Then...wrapped in bands of cloth at his death—

and placed in a tomb, to become...
to feed the world,
to be the bread of life for all who trust in him.

At the birth of Jesus, Luke is pointing us to the resurrection of Jesus, asking us to keep our eyes PEELED for where the risen Christ just might be born anew in our lives today.

Not too long ago, I heard the Presbyterian pastor Tom Are describe something that happened to him years ago, when he was pastor of a church in Jacksonville, Florida.

The congregation he served at that time was across the street from a public park. Some of the people who suffered from the experience of chronic homelessness—they called that park home. Many times, Tom says that when he was on his way into the church, someone from the park would ask him for spare change or a cup of coffee.

So one morning, Tom walked down the street to a coffee shop when one of the guys from the park spotted him.

The gentleman approached and said, “Sir, can I come in with you?”

“Sure, come on in.”

Tom ordered coffee, and then told barista, “I’ll also pay for whatever he’s having.”

The gentleman said, “I just want a cup of water,” but then he put money on the counter, and HE said, “I’d like to buy this man’s coffee,” motioning to Tom.

“I don’t understand, you’re buying my coffee?”

“You’re the pastor of that church, right?”

“Yes.”

“You have a really nice choir.”

“Yes, we do.”

This gentleman said, “I used to sing in the choir when I was in college.”

“You were in college?”

“Yes, until my mom got sick, and I had to drop out. But I love the music, and Michael, your custodian, he lets me in the balcony when the choir is rehearsing on Thursday nights. I lie in a pew and listen.”

“Reverend,” he said, “it’s the best part of my week. For an hour I am surrounded by beauty. Don’t you love it when you are just surrounded by beauty? So, I just want to buy you a cup of coffee and ask you to thank the singers at your church.”

“I’m sorry, what’s your name?” Tom asked.

“I’m Gabriel,” the gentleman said.

“Your name is Gabriel?”

“Yes sir. It’s a name from the Bible.”

“Oh, I know...

Gabriel, would you like to come and sing with our choir?”

“Oh no,” he said. “I don’t sing anymore. But tell them last week’s anthem by Rutter — it’s one of my favorites. You know, Reverend, someday it will be like that — just surrounded by beauty. Enjoy your coffee.”

And he disappeared through the crowd.³

Do you know what it's like to receive a gift that you could never give yourself?

Friends, I don't know what the most vulnerable, helpless place in your life is at this moment.

I do know this.

The One who came into the world long ago,
promises to be BORN ANEW in that very place.

He will surround it with his beauty.

He will fill that hole in your heart with God's grace...

Amen.

³ As told by the Reverend Dr. Tom Are in his sermon, "The View from Nebo," October 29, 2023, at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, IL.