

“Brown Paper Packages Tied Up with String”

John 1:1-14

Giving and receiving gifts are a central part of our celebration of Christmas. Sometimes I think they are a little too ‘central.’ We can get so wrapped up – if you’ll pardon the play on words -- in the process of finding just the right present and in spending just the right amount of money, that the real meaning behind gift giving gets lost. Christmas gifts are intended to be signs of our affection and love and respect for those to whom they are given. And the tradition of giving gifts at Christmas time must certainly be rooted in the fact that the birth of the Son of God is the most loving gift we’ve ever been given, and which prompts us to give gifts of love in response.

Sometimes how we wrap those gifts says a lot about what they mean to us and to those to whom we give them. My mother was a meticulous wrapper of gifts. The pattern on the paper had to match, the bows had to be just right. And I used to try and follow suit. But as I’ve gotten older, if not wiser, I’ve come to the conclusion that simple may be better. As a result the words of the song from “The Sound of Music,” ‘brown paper packages ties up with string,’ have become one of my favorite things. And as I thought about our Lord’s nativity, those words took on a new meaning for me, and perhaps they will resonate with you as well.

John’s Gospel, like Mark’s tells us nothing about the circumstances surround the birth of Christ. But it affirms at the outset that the Baby born in Bethlehem is none other than the Word who was, in the beginning, with God and was God, and who in coming to this earth has taken on our flesh and blood. But John notes at the outset that the Word Incarnate, the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, came to His own, and His own received Him not. I find that to be a very telling statement, one which deserves some reflection on our part, lest we, like those who were His own, at His coming, fail to receive Him, and thus reject the gift He came to bring us all.

Luke’s Gospel tells us that when the Virgin Mary gave birth to her first-born Son she wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger. The first Christmas present, God the Father’s gift of God the Son, came wrapped in the body of a newborn Baby Boy. Indeed, nine months earlier He had entered the world as an embryo, conceived in His Mother’s womb. And when He arrived, probably in a delivery as messy as any baby’s birth might be, He was wrapped around with swaddling bands, as all newborn Jewish babies were, and put to rest in an animal feeding trough. God’s greatest gift came in the equivalent of brown paper wrapping – nothing spectacular at all.

What is spectacular is what is wrapped up in that new born Baby. John tells us in his Gospel that in the Word made flesh the glory of God is revealed, full of grace and truth. Grace is a word which stands at the center our Christian faith. The birth of the Christ Child, the promised Savior, is the ultimate expression of God’s graciousness to a fallen and rebellious world. Grace is all about getting what we do not deserve. We do not deserve to have God come in the flesh, to be called Emmanuel, God with us; to be named Jesus, the One who saves us from our sins. But that is who and what comes to us wrapped up the Baby lying in a manger – God’s grace for you and me.

More than that, in this little One, comes all the truth we need to know about ourselves and God and the world in which we live. At the heart of that truth is the inescapable fact that every single one of us is of infinite value in the sight of our Maker. But beyond that is the equally inescapable fact that we are people in desperate need of a Savior. Our heavenly Father is not willing that any of us should perish. No matter what we have been or said or done, we are precious in God's sight – so precious that God the Son was willing to come into this world and share in our life with us, even to the point of taking on the punishment our sins deserve, that we might be saved.

The most paradoxical thing about the birth of Christ, this brown paper package, tied up with strings, is that in Him the glory of the One and Only, God the Son is truly revealed. The glory of the One and Only is the glory of His servant heart. In embracing the plan for our salvation God the Son emptied Himself of the prerogatives of His divinity and took the form of a servant, leaving behind the glories of heaven for the frailties of earth. He lived in poverty, knew sadness and grief, experienced betrayal and rejection. And in obedience to His Father's will, He offered His perfect life as the only atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. A hidden glory, but glory nonetheless.

As important as the question, What was wrapped in that package? is the question, Why was it wrapped that way? The most obvious answer is that it was only in being like us in every way that He could truly identify with us and know firsthand what we experience living in this fallen world of ours. The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that He was tested in all the same ways we are so that He could be touched by our weaknesses and needs and intercede for us as our Great High Priest. He understands fully and completely all the things you and I have to deal with, especially those things which test and try our faith. It's the 'brown paper' which wraps us all.

But more than that, it was essential that the Son of God share fully in our humanity so that as our Representative He could live a perfect life on our behalf. The Apostle Paul speaks of the First Adam and the Last Adam. He has in mind the first human being in the Garden of Eden, who stood as the representative for all who would be his descendants. As a result of the First Adam's disobedience all of humanity shares in his fallen human nature. The Baby born in Bethlehem came to be the Last Adam, the final representative of the human race. In His perfect obedience He represents all who put their trust in Him, and our faith in Him means we share in His righteousness.

By the same token, it was only as a fully human being that the Savior could be our representative and die in our place. As the Apostle Peter has written, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed." And yet, it was only as God Incarnate, wrapped in our flesh and blood that He could overcome the power of sin and death for you and me. The Christmas angels could sing of peace on earth, but it was a mission only to be accomplished by the Son of God, who undertook that mission wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger and ended it hanging naked on a cross.

Half way through the prologue to his Gospel John writes: “He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.” One wonders if His own, the people of Israel, to whom His coming had been promised, were turned off by the ‘brown paper wrapping’ of the humanity in which He came. They had their own expectations regarding how the Lord’s Anointed One should arrive, and what He ought to do once He got there. They were looking for a warrior king, who would restore the nation to the power and greatness it had known in the days of King David and King Solomon. If His Kingdom was not of this world, they wanted none of it or of Him.

But perhaps their unwillingness to receive the Son of God had more to do with the message He brought as the Word Incarnate. Jesus begins His ministry with a single word, “Repent!” That never has been much of a crowd pleaser! But He doesn’t stop there. He goes on to call His followers to a life marked by a love and forgiveness that seems more than a little extreme when you realize that He is serious about loving enemies and forgiving seventy times seven. But least appealing and palatable of all is the demand that being His disciple requires us to deny our selves and to embrace the self-destroying cross He has for us to bear.

For in the final analysis it’s the business about the cross – His more than ours – which led to His rejection by the very people who ought to have been the first to receive Him. For as the Apostle Paul has written, Christ crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. An executed Messiah was unacceptable. That the shedding of one man’s blood could somehow accomplish forgiveness for the sins of the whole world was absurd. When the love of God came wrapped in swaddling clothes – the quintessential brown paper package tied up with string -- and then was nailed to a cross, His own, and many others, refused to receive Him.

Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become the children of God. Perhaps in that single sentence lies the rationale behind the way in which our Savior has come to us. It was only in taking on our humanity that the Son of God could carry out His role and purpose as the Last Adam, the ultimate Representative for our fallen human race. Only by sharing in our experience, from conception in His Mother’s womb, to His death on the cross, to His glorious resurrection from the dead, could He make us what we could never be for ourselves – the children of God. Only in the plain wrapping of our humanity could He save us.

But beyond that is the fact that by coming almost incognito as one of us He made it necessary and possible for us to choose to receive Him and to believe in His name. Because our heavenly Father loves us and wants us to respond to that love, we have to be free to receive or reject the One who has been sent to be our Savior. God will not compel us to become members of the family. We are free to choose. And there must always be an element of faith and trust. Human history since that first Christmas echoes with the defiant shouts and derisive laughter of those who scoff at the thought of God taking on flesh and blood and dying for the sins of the world.

But to those who receive Him, who believe in His name, the Son of God gives the right and the power to live as the children of His heavenly Father. And that is what Christmas is all about. It is all about a God who loves us so much that no price was too high to pay for our redemption, no humiliation too great to be borne for our salvation. It's about Almighty God being born into poverty in an obscure village in a second rate country, living and dying as an itinerant preacher with only a handful of followers when all was said and done. And all for the sake of an unconditional, never failing love, wrapped up in the brown paper wrapper of our humanity.

And so, as we come to the manger this Christmas morning the choice remains. For as the carol puts it so well: "Why lies He in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding? Good Christian, fear, for sinners here the silent Word is pleading." Right here and right now we are loved – loved beyond our deserving, loved beyond our ability to comprehend or understand, but not loved beyond our ability to see and experience that love when it comes to us in the form of a newborn Baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger – the eternal Word made flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth, the glory of the One and Only Son of God. Amen.