

In the Beginning Was the Gift
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All right, let me start our timer here. Do you know what the longest sermon of the year is? Christmas morning! Merry Christmas, Central United Protestant Church! I know, I know! For many of us, it couldn't come soon enough. And the Christmas season in the church is the World Series event. And I know what you're thinking: Why is our rookie pitcher at the mound? Hold on. All right, I'm ready. We're going to be in John, the Gospel of John, chapter 1, verses 1 through 14. Would you please stand with me as we read from God's Word?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through Him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and full of truth.

This is the word of the Lord, and we are grateful for it. Please be seated.

Now, I have kept a secret my entire life. I think I have kept it quite well. You may not know this. I think my wife is beginning to suspect it. But I am a nerd, perhaps the nerdiest of nerds. I've often joked with my friends about my wife, that if she had known that I was half the nerd I truly am, she might have considered other options! Fantasy and science fiction are my daydreams and my escapes, and they have been since I was a little child. I grew up in the 1980s. What a time to be a nerd! In 1985, when I was just 10 years old, the Robotech cartoon was released in the United States. It was post-apocalyptic, if the apocalyptic event was the arrival of a hostile alien species. Fortunately, a disgruntled alien scientist sent one of their spacecrafts ahead of the invasion, so that the earthlings might have access to that technology and a hope of winning the battle. One of the results of that release was the technology that was called the VF-1J Veritech Fighter. Imagine an F-14 Tomcat fighter jet that could transform into a 40-foot robot with an assault rifle. Ah, the 1980s were a good time! That same year the toy company Hasbro released Jetfire, the transformer, in the second year of their transformer line. Jetfire was based on the VF-1J Veritech Fighter of the Robotech cartoon. It looked identical to the Robotech fighter. The toy was mostly metal and, get this, fully transformable. When my parents asked me what I wanted for Christmas, it was Jetfire, hands down. I had to have one. Now, my brothers and I were expert Christmas gift locators. We could find mom and dad's hiding spots. And, although we were familiar with the secret arts of carefully removing the wrapping paper and then replacing the wrapping paper, we suspected that our parents were equally skilled in the arts of detecting such fraud. But that year, the year I wanted Jetfire, I struck gold in my

efforts. If I remember correctly, my little brother found Jetfire in a shopping bag under my parents' bed at my grandparents' house. He of course quickly filled me in on the situation and, in my excitement, I don't think I slept for the weeks leading up to Christmas. That year I had to have Jetfire and, what's more, I knew I was getting one. Now I just had to pretend to be surprised!

What makes a good gift? Do you know? Have you ever received one? Have you ever given one? Jesus once said, "If you, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" The implication is that, though we are evil, we know what a good gift is. Adelynn, my two-year-old toddler, is easy. The entire world is either a desire or a need. In fact, our challenge is that we are receiving way too many gifts, and what do we do with the abundance of gifts? As adults, we still have needs and desires, but both get more expensive, don't they? I've had my eye on a sailboat since 2005. So, what if our need or our desire is beyond our reach? I love the car and truck commercials this time of year. How many of us have ever really been surprised by a new car in our driveway? I need that, friends. Just saying!

Could it be that the best gifts, then, are those gifts that meet a need or a desire that is unattainable by the one with the need or the desire? But you all know this. Jesus's rhetorical question reveals that, though we are evil, we know what good gifts are. Adam Clark writes that "we who are radically and diabolically depraved...feel ourselves led, by natural affection, to give those things to our children which are necessary to support their lives." But before we relegate good gifts to those things that are necessary, like the proverbial socks and underwear that we all receive from that one aunt or uncle, let's not forget the necessity of love. Every child needs and desires the love of their parents. Each of us has a need and desire to be loved. I'll never forget the year that my folks bought pretty much the only house that was available in our community. Because it was the only house, it was expensive. And because it was expensive, not only could we not afford Christmas gifts, but we couldn't afford to fix the broken heater that was what had kept that house from being sold. That particular year we all got gloves and socks for Christmas, but that wasn't the only year that we couldn't "afford" Christmas. But my parents, out of a need to show their love for their children, would not be stopped. One year my dad went down to Ace Hardware and bought a stack of PVC pipe because it was cheap. My sister got a PVC pipe swing for her doll, and I got a PVC pipe airplane. Another year, I received my first firearm. It was a plywood M60 machine gun. But one of the things that I will never forget (in fact, I'm renting the very house right now where the door is) at Christmas time, leading up to Christmas, there would be paper put over the window. And after work my dad would go out into the garage, and we were not allowed to go out there as he worked on these projects. Every Christmas my parents have communicated their love to their children in want and in plenty. They modeled and taught their love.

But I don't believe gift giving needs to be taught and/or modeled to be understood. I believe it is something that we intrinsically know. C. S. Lewis might even argue that the very nostalgia often associated with Christmas, that sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period experienced in the past or for an experience that was never experienced, is evidence of the fact that we know even of that which we are missing. He writes, "Our lifelong nostalgia, our longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off, to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside, is no mere neurotic fancy, but the truest index of our real

situation.” That those of us blessed with good gifts can long for the days gone by, is no different in this sense than for those that are not so blessed. Instead of longing for the good old days, those not so blessed wistfully wish that they, too, had been so blessed. Both testify to an intrinsic understanding that we know what a good gift is.

I'm going to share what is quickly becoming one of my favorite verses, and it's got a surprising connection to the first chapter of the Gospel of John. It's in Proverbs. It's Proverbs 25:2. Now, the book of Proverbs is a book of moral and ethical instructions dealing with many aspects of life. It guides us in how to lead wise, godly lives, and how to avoid the pitfalls of unwise, ungodly conduct. But every so often we find a verse in Proverbs that reveals the heart and person of God, a part of Him that we can all relate to. Proverbs 25:2 reads: “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.” For the longest time, the first half of this verse has thrown me for a loop. What kind of glory could God get by concealing something? Do you know the glory in concealing a thing? I believe that you do. It's connected to the intrinsic understanding of a good gift. I mentioned earlier that my siblings and I were good gift finders. We were masters! One year my mom, in desperation, created a code for her gift tags. She knew that it wasn't good enough to simply wrap the presents; she needed to continue to conceal the contents of the wrapped gift. If I had asked for an all-metal, transformable robot and my sister had asked for a Cabbage Patch doll, they might be wrapped in similar packages, but the mass and the balance would give them away, if you knew to whom the package was intended. And so, my mom created this code. We could see the gift, but we didn't know who it was for. Of course, that year she lost the code. There we were on Christmas morning unwrapping a present, and quickly it would just poof out of our hands as my mom realized that that gift wasn't for that child, and it would be swooped over to the person who it was intended for. But why would my mom go to that length to conceal a gift? Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” My mom was preserving for herself that moment of joy that comes in the giving of the gift. It was and is a moment of joy set before the giver: the moment in which a need or desire is fulfilled by someone who loves you, and the moment in which that person recognizes what you have done. We all try for that every Christmas, don't we?

Timing, then, is as important to the gift as the need, or the desire, or the inability, to get the thing for ourselves. There is an air of anticipation that comes in both the giving and the receiving of the most precious gifts. The other day I was listening to Hank Hanegraaff, the Bible Answer Man, when a three-year-old called in with a question: “Why did it take so long for God to send Jesus?” I think that it might have been that God was both waiting for us to recognize our need and building the anticipation of the reveal. And the counter-question might be: If God was to give us a gift, it would probably be the best gift of all time, and so how much time would it take to build that anticipation? About 2000 years. But that God might take joy in the revelation of a gift is not the most surprising connection to our passage today. The Old Testament that you might hold in your hands was translated to English from the original Hebrew. The word translated “things” in this proverb, is the Hebrew word “devar.” It's from the Hebrew word for “a word; or by implication a matter or thing spoken of.” So, to rephrase then, that first half of that proverb could be translated, “It is the glory of God to conceal things spoken of,” and the last part of it, “but the glory of kings to search things spoken of out.” But John didn't have a Hebrew Old Testament, nor did he rely on the original Hebrew. John had an Old Testament that had been translated from the Hebrew to the Greek. What we find, when we look at the Greek Old Testament, is nothing short of astonishing. What we find in this specific proverb is that it is the glory of God to conceal “the Logos,” the

very same word that is translated “the Word” in the Gospel of John. It is the glory of God to conceal the Word. The Word, Jesus the Christ, is God's gift to us. It was the glory of God to conceal the gift.

This morning, when we consider the Christmas story, I want you to conceive of the story as a gift wrapped and placed under the tree. In front of me you have the Nativity: the wise men, the shepherds, Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus. This is the proverbial gift, the Son of God, wrapped in the context of its meaning. It is the equivalent of you and I, as parents or grandparents, placing our gifts under the tree. It is the moment of heightened anticipation on Christmas Day, at the revealing of those gifts. “In the beginning was the Gift, and the Gift was with God, and the Gift was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. To all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Gift became flesh and dwelt among us.” God, from the beginning of time, had a specific gift in mind and He didn't want to ruin the surprise. John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” The gift promises to meet the need and desire we all have for eternity. The gift promises to save us from our failures. Socrates stated, 500 years before the first Christmas, “It may be that deity can forgive sins, but I don't see how.” If you are honest, you know your need. Even Socrates knew what his need was. The Gift promises to do just that. The Christmas story is the placing of that gift under the tree, the moment when only the giver should know what the gift is, the perfect moment of anticipation by both the giver and the receiver.

The second part of the proverb is equally as astonishing. In the Hebrew, “It is the glory of God to conceal a thing, and it is the glory of kings to search the thing out.” And you would think that it would translate the same, logos and logos, but it does not. It was the glory of God to conceal “the Logos,” but it is our glory to search for “the pragma.” It's the Greek word which goes from Latin to English, and we get this idea of pragmatic. It's a pragmatic thing. It's something that has been done. It is a matter or a deed, an accomplishment. Jesus the Christ, God's gift, the Word, would secure the forgiveness of our sins pragmatically, through a deed, through an accomplishment. When the angels appeared to the shepherds, they said, “Fear not! For behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” Within the context of the Christmas story, that salvation was a pragmatic deed or work that was yet to be done. The shepherds, the wise men, King Herod, they knew that the gift had been given. It was wrapped neatly in a manger. But they had yet to discover what that gift was going to do. Today, it's a pragmatic deed or work that has already been revealed, that has already been done.

Do you want to experience the glory designed and destined for humanity? Then search out this pragmatic thing. Discover why you need a savior, and you will discover the Savior you desire. He did this thing for the joy that was set before Him. He did this thing for that moment when you would realize you needed it and that He did it because He loved you. It's the joy every good gift brings to the giver, and you are that joy for the God of heaven. Galatians 4:4-5: “When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.” The glory of humanity is that we would inherit God's kingdom. It is a glory that is not extended to the angels, nor to anything else in all of creation. And it's the glory that you are destined for.

Each Christmas has its own flavor. This year, for Sarah and me, there have been notes of bitterness. We lost a dear friend and are close to losing another. And, as your pastor, I know that we're not alone. Many of you also have experienced that bitterness or other bitterness this Christmas. But there are other notes as well. Last night my daughter Adelynn watched the Charlie Brown Christmas Story for the first time. I watched as she danced through the whole production with a huge smile on her face. I wish I could have stayed in that moment forever. But, as it passed, I wondered what could connect these two notes, the notes of bitterness and the notes of joy. There's only one thing, and it's found in the opening of John's gospel and his description of who Jesus is: Jesus is the gift given by God that was in the beginning, that was with God, that was God. His eternality is what qualifies Him to give Himself on a cross for your eternal salvation. That is the Christmas gift. It was for His glory that He concealed it, and it is for your glory to search it out. James 1:17: "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." Do not neglect this gift!