

Excerpt of “The Gifts of Christmas: Christmas Eve”

The Gift of Christ

Merry Christmas! We are so glad you are here on this Christmas Eve to celebrate the birth of Jesus. We’ve almost made it to Christmas Day. If you have not felt the sense of anticipation for weeks if not months, then you certainly do now – and you’re definitely not the parent of a young child!

While many of you will wait until tomorrow morning to give and receive gifts, tonight we are going to unwrap the gifts of Christmas together as we journey toward the manger in Bethlehem and celebrate the arrival of Jesus, the ultimate gift of Christmas.

But before we tear into the wrapping, I have a question for each of us to consider: What are you waiting for tonight?

Maybe you’re waiting for family to arrive. Maybe you’re waiting for the delivery of a special gift – or perhaps a late package. Maybe you’re waiting for direction or healing. Perhaps you’re just waiting for me to stop talking or the craziness of the season to be over so life can get back to normal. Whatever it is you are waiting for, I encourage you to set it aside and spend the next few minutes this Christmas Eve watching and waiting for the miracle of Christmas – the arrival of the God of the universe come to earth as a human baby.

There’s a great song by the singer-songwriter David Wilcox called “Miracle.” It’s a song about the risk of missing Jesus because we are waiting for a miracle – or because we think

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the miracle should and will look different. [Consider Googling and reading even more of the lyrics in the service. These are offered as minimums.] The song says,

Few will choose to follow
Out of all the star invites
Most will hide safe inside
With the lantern turned up bright
Waiting for a miracle

So tonight I invite you into the darkness, for it's in that darkness that we most clearly see the light of Christmas and it's where we experience the gifts Jesus offers this season.

What are you waiting for tonight that could take your eyes off the coming of the Savior? What is hindering your journey to the manger in Bethlehem? What expectation are you holding that may distract you from the true depths offered in Christ? What is keeping you from seeing the miracle?

Tonight I invite you to experience the greatest gift of all – the gift of God made flesh in Jesus Christ. I invite you to follow. Instead of *waiting* for a miracle, let's step out into the darkness and allow the light of Jesus to shine in our lives as we accept the gifts of Christmas.

As a church we've spent the last four weeks journeying together through the season of Advent. The word *Advent* means "coming" or "arrival," and the season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing. Advent is not just an extension of Christmas, it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the

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opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming.

During Advent we light candles on a wreath, which represent aspects of Jesus's coming to a world lost in darkness. Each flame represents a gift that Jesus brings to us. Tonight we will unwrap the gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace. And we will finish by lighting the fifth candle on the wreath as we celebrate the gift of Jesus Himself.

1. The Gift of Hope

The first gift we unwrap is the gift of hope. And while we often think of hope in the future, God's gift of hope includes hope past, hope present, and hope future.

What is the longest you've waited for something? The people of Israel knew all about waiting. Their entire history was marked by waiting. For thousands of year they waited and longed and expected God to fulfill His original promise to send them a Messiah who would set them free. Their prophets, including Isaiah, reminded them along the way that God had not forgotten, that He would still come through. As more and more time passed, the Israelites could look back at what Isaiah foretold: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6).

The people of Israel could have grown discouraged because they hadn't seen the fulfillment of the Messiah yet. I'm sure many of them probably did, especially as generations came and went. Or they could draw renewed hope for the future in what God had promised in the past. We have the same choice.

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The gift of hope reminds us of the promises and prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus's coming. They show us that God was working all along, even when it was difficult to see and keep waiting. As we reflect on hope through Advent and at Christmas, we too can look back at God's faithfulness in our lives and gain hope and confidence at what He will do in our present and our future.

For us, we look back on Christ's birth, but the season of Advent reminds us to wait and expect His coming again, which is still future to us. We long for the time when all will be restored and made new. We experience the pain and suffering of today and wait in eager hope for the future when God will make all things right.

But what about today in the here and now, our present?

In the first chapter of Luke, we find Jesus's birth foretold to Mary by the angel Gabriel. In the midst of life's questions, do you ever find yourself wishing that Gabriel would just show up and let you know what to expect? I mean, wouldn't it be easier to just know? Well, maybe. But in this case perhaps it would have been easier *not* to know. What do you do with information like Mary got? How would you have handled that unexpected news?

Thankfully, Mary responded in faith and held fast to the hope of the promise of Immanuel, God with us. She chose to believe the angel's message. She chose to hope that what was impossible would be possible and that the Messiah was coming – through her.

Because of the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus, we can have hope in our present, no matter what our struggles and circumstances may be. Our present hope in Jesus doesn't stop the storms of life. It doesn't change the immediate situations we face.

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But as Hebrews 6:19 describes, it is our “hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” Like an anchor holds a ship steady against the wind and the waves, our hope holds us firm and secure in the midst of life’s storms. Let this season be one of secure hope in the midst of whatever storms you face.

God is at work. He has delivered on His promises past, and He will make all things right in the future. In the present, our hope lies in the fact that the baby who was born in a stable in Bethlehem has come and He will return again. In the meantime, He is with us, filling us with hope.

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