

Sermon – Luke 2:1-20
David R. Lyle
Grace Lutheran Church
Christmas Eve – Year A
24 December 2016

“The Happiest Gift Exchange”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus Christ, born in the city of David, our Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

1. Throughout the Advent season, as the tree has gone up and the cookies have been baked, as gifts have been wrapped and carols have been sung, I’ve had more than one opportunity to remind my children of what’s most important in our celebrations. Being pastor’s kids, they know the answer to the question, “What is Christmas all about?” With pious light in their eyes, they’ll respond, “Jesus!” And I, of course, will affirm them for their confession of faith. But if I’m being honest, I will quietly add to their answer in my mind: “Jesus...and presents!” That’s what the season’s all about! I can’t help myself. I love presents, to give them and to receive them. My inner five-year old is as excited about tearing open the perfectly wrapped presents under our tree as our actual five-year old. Age has not made the waiting any easier for me. So it is that I give thanks for gift exchanges that come earlier in the season. Several weeks ago at a white elephant gift exchange, I was able to turn a Christopher Radko snowman ornament and a daily devotional into something far better: this amazing pair of oven mitts, which have provided hours of entertainment as our boys have run around the house pinching each other, Santa vs. Frosty, or as I have used them as puppets. This gift exchange was a happy one for me, indeed.
2. Of course, the exchange of gifts at Christmastime isn’t about the gifts. It’s about this Jesus we gather to worship tonight in the darkness. As Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem under the terror of Caesar and the threat of

Herod; as the shepherds watched their flocks in fear, first of predators and then of the suddenly-appearing heavenly host; so, too, do we gather in a darkness deeper than that of simple nighttime. Violence, from Aleppo to Berlin, from Turkey to Chicago, has not taken a break for the Christmas season. Threats of nuclear proliferation abound. Fear seeks to take deep root in our world and our lives. And we bring our own fear with us this night, less newsworthy but no less real. We struggle forward, bound by sin and death, threatened with disease and despair. The darkness of the night over Bethlehem long ago, the darkness in our world today, seems unpierceable.

3. Unpierceable for us, perhaps, but not for God. For it came to pass in those days that a gift was given, a child born. The darkness of the world is rent open as heavenly light pours in. Good news of great joy is given to the shepherds, and through them to all people. For a gift is given, and it bears a gift label. To whom is this gift given? *To you*. And what do we find when we unwrap this gift, bundled up not in shiny paper and bows, but in bands of cloth and a simple manger? We find Jesus, God wrapped up in human flesh, born to save his people from their sins, from death and the devil, from even the deepest darkneses in which we find ourselves or that we inflict upon one another. We unwrap the gift, and we find Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of this world.
4. But, oddly enough, this gift of Jesus for us is not simply a gift received, as if that were not enough; it is a gift exchange. For Jesus is born not simply to give, but to receive. And what does Jesus receive from us? Not oven mitts, nor even, at first, the best we have to give. In the Incarnation, God in Christ has taken upon himself the frail flesh and sinful brokenness of humanity, of you and of me. Jesus is born not merely as a prophet of peace or a preacher of love, nor even only to be God in our midst. God is born in Jesus to take upon himself our darkness, our disease, our death, and to give us the glories of heaven in return. Jesus has come not simply to be born but, finally, to die and

to rise, that the entire trajectory of our lives and of this whole benighted sphere would be altered forever; where once we moved toward death, now in grace we move toward life. In 1516, on the eve of the Reformation, Martin Luther wrote, "Therefore, learn Christ and him crucified. Learn to pray to him and, despairing of yourself, say: 'Thou, Lord Jesus, art my righteousness, but I am thy sin. Thou hast taken upon thyself what is mine and hast given to me what is Thine.' For Christ dwells only in sinners. For this reason he descended from heaven."

5. Yes, for this reason Jesus has descended from heaven, abandoning glory for a stable and light for darkness. To this purpose: to take upon himself sin and death and despair, to graciously gift us with light and life and love. It is a gift exchange that is not fair, but that's how grace works as God enters our world to take away the worst that we have given and received, giving us instead grace upon grace. As Paul wrote to Titus, the grace of God has appeared in the One who gave himself for us. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!
6. The other day I ran across a news story about Alexis and Xavier, a five-year-old boy and his younger brother in Auckland, New Zealand. Alexis wanted to exchange Christmas presents with his hero, who happens to be the local garbage man, or rubbish man, as they say Down Under. Every Thursday morning, Terrence the rubbish man comes through the neighborhood with his truck. And every Thursday morning for the past three years, Alexis would stand in awe, waiting for Terrence to come take out the trash. So, this year, Alexis and Xavier gave gifts to Terrence in the form of a few bottles of beer, or "reindeer juice" as they were calling it. And Terrence gave the boys a few presents in return.
7. It is, of course, a little amusing to us grown-ups that a little boy would choose a rubbish man as a hero and recipient of gifts. Then again, at Christmas,

perhaps these children have it right. Perhaps this exchange is what Christmas is all about. For who do we welcome once more this night if not the One who was born into this world's rubbish, this one who clears away the sinful, deadly garbage of our lives and gives us the very joy of God instead? Jesus has been born to gift us with the presence of God and the promise of the Kingdom, and to do so he takes upon himself our sinful, frail humanity to make room for the glories of God.

8. So this night, whatever else is under your tree, whatever other gifts you give and receive, look to this gift that is given to you. See in the manger the very presence of God; see in Christ's cross your gracious salvation; eat and drink the bread of life and the wine of forgiveness. As Jesus gives himself to you, see him take from you all that is shrouded in darkness, broken by sin, or threatened by despair. It is all his now, and he is yours, gifted to you in this happiest of exchanges. To you is born this night in the city of David a Savior. Born to live for you as God's gift, born to die for you to take all the rubbish that would keep us from God. Jesus, born and given to you, for you. In him, fear is cast out, replaced by the chorus of angels as we join the song: Glory to God in the highest! Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, today and forever. Amen.