

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian on December 24, 2021

GOD'S GREAT SURPRISE AT CHRISTMAS

For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given. Luke 2:11

Tonight, after almost two years with most of our celebrations being cancelled or down sized, we gather in this holy place to remember the birth of Jesus. Last year a restricted number were allowed in the building, but they could not fully participate. People just sat in the pews without being allowed to sing the carols.

This Christmas Eve, we return with a semblance of the normal routine. Traditionally, many people follow a regular pattern of activities during the Christmas season. Many families follow a regular ritual. They visit certain people on certain days. They may gather with one side of the family on Christmas Eve and another on Christmas day. There is a list of people, with whom, gifts are exchanged. Tomorrow morning, many will arise and open gifts without expecting any surprises.

For many of us, most of the packages under the tree will contain items that we either hope or expect to receive. When I was young, my father's mother always knit something for each of her thirteen grandchildren. You knew it would either be socks or mittens. My parents were aware of what I wanted Santa to bring. Thus, very seldom were there any surprises on Christmas morning. This is probably true for many of you, you have made your wish list known or possibly someone has already told you what to expect.

This year, believe it or not, I am hoping for socks. I seem to destroy socks in a month's time. I expect tomorrow morning there to be some nice pairs of socks under the tree. So many of the presents we open come as no surprise.

But there are times that we receive gifts that come as a complete surprise. Each of us has received gifts that were totally unexpected. A person has taken the time to purchase something for us that we never wanted or would have thought to buy for ourselves. Yet after we received it, we find it to be a special treat that gives us great pleasure. The giver met a need that we did not know we had.

The first Christmas came as a surprise as well. The world was not hoping for the birth of a baby. In the Gospels, God surprises earth with heaven, coming here on Christmas Day.

The Jews of the first century were looking for the coming of a Messiah They had lived under foreign occupation for far too long. They knew the Romans were the most powerful of their several overlords. The Jewish people had come to realize that on their own they could never re-establish their independence as a nation. They knew what they needed. They looked forward to that day when God

would raise up a powerful military leader. This leader would gather strength and restore Israel to be a nation among the nations. This leader would restore the royal house of David.

Instead of a military leader of royal bearing,
They were given a helpless baby born in a stable.
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.

The Greeks, Romans and others of the first century were looking for the truth about life. The great philosophers of Greece had focused on the gift of reason to be the means of discovering the meaning and purpose of life. There were followers of all kinds of philosophies that were floating around the Mediterranean world. There were Stoics, Epicureans, Platonists and others competing for the allegiance of the people. The Magi in the Christmas story represent all those people who search for truth. Yet God did not give the world a new idea to comprehend or a philosophy to follow or a plan to implement. The Wiseman ended their journey in a stable. The search for truth led them to a baby.

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As we come to this Sanctuary tonight, we come wanting God to give us a variety of gifts. Each person has his or her own list of what they think God should give them.

Some come hoping for healing. They have some problem of the mind or body that limits them. Or maybe it is a member of their family who has come down with some potentially fatal disease. So, they come hoping that God will give the gift of healing.

There are some who come thinking that Jesus is a guru of success. They see God as the power behind positive thinking. Many believe that if they put trust in God then all will go well for them in search for a new job or a big raise. Trust in God is thought to be the way to secure one's future.

Others come hoping God will help them in their personal lives. They have a poor marriage, or they are unable to communicate with their children, or they feel unlovable. They want God to change these realities in their life. They feel the one born at Christmas can mend all the frayed relationships of life.

There are others here tonight that would like God to give them the gift of personal growth. They know that they are not the kind of person they would like to be. They believe that real growth comes in having one's character molded by a higher power. So, they come hoping for the gift of wholeness.

I could go on and on in naming the types of things that we as humans would like from God. They are all real needs. These are gifts that God can give us. But they are not the most important gift that God would like to give us.

The gift God seeks to give us is Himself. In coming to the world as a baby God teaches us that you and I are part of the created order and need the goods of this world. But we have also been created in the image of God with a need for God's love. We have a longing deep within us, which can only be satisfied by God's love. We have hungers that only the love of God can satisfy.

Dan Wakefield is an author and screenwriter. He wrote two bestselling novels, ***Starting Over***, and ***Going All the Way***. Several years ago, he wrote a book about his own life, which began with these words:

One balmy spring morning in Hollywood, a month or so before my 48th birthday, I woke up screaming. I got out of bed, went in to the next room, sat down on a couch and screamed again. This was not, in other words, one of those waking nightmares left over from sleep that is dispelled by the comforting light of day. It was rather, a response to the reality that another morning had broken in a life I could only deal with sedated by wine, loud music, moving images and wired to electronic games that further distracted my fragmented attention from a growing sense of a blank, nameless pain in the pit of my very being, my most essential self.

Following this experience Wakefield moved back to Boston. That Christmas Eve he was in a bar when a house painter named Tony said he would like to go to church. Wakefield decided that he would like to go as well. His experience of that candlelight service began his slow journey back to God – to the God whom he had rejected in college twenty-five years earlier. He had sought satisfaction in philosophy and writing. He had thought he could be made whole by a Freudian therapist. He had enjoyed all the pleasures the world had to offer. He had received honors and recognition for his accomplishments.

Yet it was in Church amidst the flickering candles of Christmas Eve that he found the presence of God that filled the void at the very center of his being. In worship his soul was fed by the presence of Christ.

The surprising truth is that we have a need that we do not always recognize. We have a need not only for what God can give us, we have a need for God Himself. We need the divine love to make us whole. Our task is to accept this gracious gift of love. Even when we feel we do not deserve it – God offers us his love.

The great gift of Christmas is Christ himself. God chose to give us nothing less than himself. There are many things in life that are important to us. We need

material goods, meaningful employment, health, the love of friends and family. They are important yet they are not enough.

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The Scandinavian writer Sigrid Unse tells us:

“When we give each other Christmas gifts in Jesus’ Name, let us remember that he has given us the sun and the moon and the stars, and the earth with its forests and mountains and oceans — and all that lives and moves upon them. And to save us from our own foolishness, from all our sins, he came down to earth and gave us himself.”

At Bethlehem God has come to you and to me. In a few moments we will hear an anthem that captures this truth. The song begins:

**Who would think that what was needed?
To transform and save the earth
Might not be a plan or army,
Proud in purpose, proved in worth?
Who would think, despite derision,
That a child should lead the way?
God surprises earth with heaven,
Coming here on Christmas Day.**

This Christmas may you be surprised by the presence of Jesus in new ways and receive him for fully into your heart.