

This Indescribable Gift

Isaiah 61:1-2a; Luke 1:5-24; John 1:6-8; I Thessalonians 5:16-18

Third Sunday of Advent, December 14, 2008

Whitefish UMC

† *Three sons left home, went out on their own and prospered. Getting together for Christmas, they discussed the gifts they were able to give their elderly mother.*

The first said, “I built a big house for our mother.”

The second said, “I sent her a Mercedes.”

The third smiled and said, “I’ve got you both beat. You remember how mom enjoyed reading the Bible? And you know she can’t see very well. So I sent her a remarkable parrot that recites the entire Bible. It took elders in the church 12 years to teach him. He’s one of a kind. Mom just has to name the chapter and verse, and the parrot recites it.”

Soon thereafter, mom sent out her letters of thanks:

“Dear Milton,” she wrote one son, “The house you built is too huge. I live in only one room, but I have to keep the whole house clean!”

“Dear Gerald,” she wrote to another, “I am too old to travel. I stay at home most of the time, so I rarely use the Mercedes.”

“Dearest Donald,” she wrote to her third son, “You have the good sense to know what your Mother likes.

The chicken was Dee-licious!”

† Tis the season of gifts—of giving and receiving. If you’re like me and have lots of family that lives far away, this weekend is crunch-time. Why? Because if you don’t get your presents in the mail, they might

- not arrive on time. That's not such a big deal if the recipient can expect lots of gifts under the tree, but for some, there might not be another gift to open on Christmas morning.
- † How ironic that gifts, meant to give pleasure, create so much anxiety. And heaven knows we are anxious enough without having to worry about Christmas gifts, right?
 - † We live in an age of anxiety, even fear. We long for a coherent, rational, secure, harmonious, and orderly world. But chaos, danger, disappointment loom and threaten. Whether in our personal lives or in our world, there's plenty to be anxious about.
 - † Is there something in us that is hardwired for fear? Of course, fear has a useful purpose sometimes—it can keep us from getting into trouble when danger looms, that is, if we have a choice about the danger that presents itself.
 - † From birth we fear falling, abandonment. Later there is fear of failure, fear of the unknown, fear of aging, fear of debilitating illness, fear of death.
 - † Yes, fear is a powerful motivator. And often fear causes us to make bad decisions. Fear in our personal lives causes us to guard our hearts, to stay in bad situations for fear that change will bring something even worse, to settle for the lowest risk scenario in our careers, dreams, or relationships.
 - † In our church, fear turns us into caretakers of the status quo rather than risk-takers for the growth of mission and ministry for God. In our world, fear causes nations to turn to torture, rendition, and betrayal of our highest values.

- † Of course we become fearful at times, anxious about the future. It's comforting to know that the biblical characters of Advent are fearful and anxious, too. In today's story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, for example, we're told that Zechariah is overwhelmed by fear at the sight of an angel announcing good news.
- † Then there's Mary, Joseph, the shepherds—all confounded by fear of the unspeakable gift of the Messiah in their midst. But do you notice that they don't remain paralyzed by their fear?
- † Faithful courage is not the absence of fear. It's the willingness to act, to follow, to be in the face of fear. As Anne Lamott says, "courage is merely fear that said its prayers."
- † Which brings us to Paul's advice to the church at Thessalonica: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."
- † I wonder, how would our fear and our anxiety be transformed if we were to live as Paul suggests? For it seems to me that a lot of the fear and anxiety that paralyze and consume us is self-inflicted.
- † Remember that for Paul the greatest sin is our "willful rebellion of the creature against the Creator; it is the attempt to live from oneself rather than from God. In sin we attempt to secure the good of our lives by our own efforts, rather than to receive fulfillment as a gift of God."
- † As Marvin Shaw, professor emeritus at Montana State University puts it in his wonderful book, *The Paradox of Intention: Reaching the Goal by Giving Up the Attempt to Reach It*: "In short sin is self-reliance, the attempt to fulfill life by one's own effort; as such it leads to anxiety.

- For one comes to worry about one's ability to make life truly secure and complete through one's own efforts.
- † The life of sinful self-reliance leads to pride, boasting of one's own accomplishments in wisdom or righteousness or happiness, as if all of the goods of human life were not really gifts of God.
 - † True life, life lived as gift of God, would be free from both anxiety and pride, for one would be living by God's power and not one's own efforts."
 - † If you're like me, the first time you hear that statement you'll respond: "That's a recipe for irresponsibility" or something to that effect. I have a confession to make: one of my least favorite Christian hymns is "God Will Take Care of You."
 - † Forgive me if it's one of your favorite hymns. In particular I loathe the third verse: "All you may need he will provide, God will take care of you; nothing you ask will be denied; God will take care of you." And then the chorus: "God will take care of you, through every day, o'er all the way; he will take care of you, God will take care of you."
 - † Growing up as the oldest daughter in a dysfunctional family, I KNEW that God did not give me what I asked for. If I wanted a particular thing, if I wanted something done, I needed to earn it or take care of it myself. I learned that lesson by being disappointed and feeling invisible a lot of the time.
 - † As I grew older, I took on more and more responsibility for my family's happiness and well-being, along with my staff's in my job, my church, and other parts of our life. Although I appeared to be everyone's anchor, brick, rock, and other weighty metaphors, I made myself sick with worry and anxiety.

- † Thanks to better living through chemistry, a great therapist who wouldn't let me take on her problems, and spiritual guidance and prayer, I began to release the need I had to keep everyone and everything afloat on my own. Of course I regress now and then, and I rely on God's working through friends and colleagues to return me to the right path of ultimate reliance on God's grace.
- † Why do I tell you this very personal and maybe too revealing story of my life? Because the message of Advent is not only a statement of courage in the midst of fearful times and things, it's also a beacon of freedom—freedom from reliance on ourselves alone.
- † Isaiah's words, echoed by Jesus as he begins his ministry, ring out to us as they did to the people held captive long ago: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...."
- † Christians claim that the coming birth of the baby in Bethlehem is about that—releasing us from our prisons, our liberation from captivity. But most of us aren't in jail or held captive in some dank dungeon, are we?
- † Or are we? Who among us isn't in some kind of captivity this morning? Who isn't aware deeply in their very beings that there are forces that hem them in, restrict and confine them, keep them from the fullness of life, the life God has given them to live?
- † Perhaps it's the captivity of illness; can you receive the gift that God will come with peace and assurance and courage? Or maybe it's the captivity of guilt. You can't believe what you've done. If people

- knew, they wouldn't understand, let alone forgive you. Can you receive the gift of God's forgiveness that allows you to return to freedom and wholeness?
- † Perhaps you are held captive by anger. It's the opposite of guilt, because you have been wronged and offended and you can't stop resenting and living out your anger. You roll over and over the offense on your tongue, savoring it and letting it consume you. Can you receive the gift of reconciliation that only comes from God?
 - † You may be imprisoned by addiction or a relationship that feels like a prison. Maybe you are confined by a need for success or recognition. Can you receive God's gift of love for who you are, not what you do?
 - † What about the captivity of brokenheartedness? Because someone you love has died or has abandoned you? Can you accept God's gift of hope known in the new life promised in the resurrection of Jesus?
 - † Return for a moment to the Gospel story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Both lived good and faithful lives, but for the longest time they were deprived of what they wanted most: a child.
 - † Remember that in first century Israel, an infertile couple was considered to have displeased God in some way—especially the woman. When the angel appears to Zechariah, the good priest lets his fear keep him from believing in and receiving the gift of a promised son. He is struck dumb by his fear and doubt. His wife Elizabeth, though, accepts the unlikely gift of her pregnancy, old and barren as she is.
 - † “This is what the Lord has done for me!” she exclaims. See how she rejoices, praises God, and gives thanks! She will give birth to John,

the one who came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him, in the words of John's gospel.

† Elizabeth will play a crucial role in sheltering her cousin Mary, in recognizing just who Mary is carrying in her womb. Her words to Mary, upon receiving her cousin, and feeling her own child leap in her womb, ring out:

† “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (Luke 1:42-45)

† Zechariah, though, is not left in his captivity of his muteness. When their child John is born and Zechariah accepts and rejoices in this gift, he lets loose with a glorious prophecy of his own:

† “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel...by the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace.” (Luke 1:67-80)

† And so this is the true gift of Christmas: the coming of Christ in us and in our world to release our fears and anxieties and free us from what binds us in captivity.

† The question is: will you receive this unspeakable gift?

† I pray that you will, that I will, together, amen.

Sources:

Dr. Marvin Shaw, The Paradox of Intention: Reaching the Goal by Giving Up the Attempt to Reach It. 1988.

John M. Buchanan, “Hopes and Fears,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

Ibid. “Born to Set Thy People Free,” <http://fourthchurch.org>