

Christmas Eve Reflection

I heard this odd Christmas song this year. Maybe it's been around for a long time and I never noticed it before, but this season it struck me as particularly tone-deaf. I can't remember the words exactly, but the line in it that caught me was something about how thankful we are to Jesus for bringing us Santa Claus.

Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised at the songwriter's valiant effort to connect all the pieces of what Christmas has become in our culture. Really—shopping, reindeer, snow, food, gifts, baby, manger, star, God—can we put all this in the same picture?

I think there is a consistent theme that runs through everything we do at Christmas, and it is this: gift-giving. Very early in our lives, we learn to understand Christmas as the season of giving. And whether we have been formed by our nostalgic memories of Santa Claus or Scrooge's transformation in *The Christmas Carol* or by the story of Jesus' birth, we are reminded in this season to be generous people. It makes us feel good about ourselves; it reminds us to notice and think kindly of other people, especially people who have less than we do. It gives us hope for what can seem like a hopelessly damaged world.

Some of us start thinking in July about the gifts we want and the gifts we want to give. I myself have found that almost every time I try to do this, I spend the weeks just before Christmas running around trying to find what I bought and squirreled away, or wondering why I thought that particular gift was a good idea. So no matter what I do, the last few days are a mad scramble. Despite all my better intentions, I end up mostly grateful for Amazon Prime.

But for all of us, I think, gift giving is an imperfect science at best. We can never be sure the gift we have chosen will accomplish the impact we hope for. It turns out, though, that receiving a gift is an equally difficult thing to do gracefully...maybe even harder than giving one. I open a box of holiday goblets someone thoughtfully chose for me and my mind goes immediately to who else I can re-gift them to. I think maybe I'm not alone in my ungraceful receiving habits. Watch how people turn the conversation aside when they are given a compliment. Think about how indebted, or guilty, you feel when you receive a gift from someone you barely know. Our typical response is not gratitude, but the feeling that we should run out and quickly find something for them too.

We work hard at refining our skills in gift *giving*. But if we are really going to understand the meaning of this night, I wonder whether we must reflect a little more on what it takes to be a grateful—and grace-full—gift *receiver*. Because the real story of Christmas is that we are blessed to be givers because of what it is we have *received*.

One of the hard parts of being a grateful gift receiver is that sometimes you get gifts you thought you didn't need, or want. I think that happened when Jesus was born. People who lived then had actually given some thought to the kind of savior that would work for them.

Prophets, politicians, even the regular people who waited for the Messiah knew what they needed: a good military leader who would put the country in order. Also someone with exemplary political skills, and if possible, someone with a portfolio of good domestic programs. What they got was a baby. A baby.

I would guess we might find we have a lot in common if we asked each other what it is we long for this Christmas. I think many of our answers would include something about wanting a calmer, more centered life. A way to rise above our anxiety, or our busy-ness, all the *stuff* we have surrounded ourselves with. A little relief from our obligations is what we would be truly grateful for this Christmas. But instead, each year we seem to get more people who need us or need something *from* us. We gather more commitments, not less. No matter how many times we ask God to lift us up out of the cluttered-ness of our lives, we keep getting more things that tie us down. Are these gifts? Not so sure.

This is often the way God loves us: with gifts we didn't name for ourselves; with detours that transform us into people we hadn't planned on becoming. The God who comes tonight—and every night—seems not to answer our prayers by lifting us out of our lives, but by pitching a tent right in the middle of whatever space is available—a stable, a sticky kitchen table, a messy desk. Not to save us from our over-commitment and entanglements, but to make meaning out of them. To help us see our people, our jobs, our *obligations* in a different way...for the gifts that just might be hiding inside of them.

If we are wise, we will accept, and wonder about, and be grateful for the gift that comes to us even when it wasn't our plan and it isn't our idea. The gifts that matter are the ones we receive with our hands empty—not over-full with stuff we want to reciprocate with.

Every Christmas offers us the opportunity to practice receiving, as well as giving. In the gifts that come *into* your hands tonight or tomorrow—from your child or your spouse or your second cousin who hardly knows anything about you—I hope you will allow the experience of *receiving*—to sink deep within you. Practice being a good gift receiver, grateful for whatever comes to you.

...Because we have to be able to receive, in order to know what we really celebrate at Christmas—that a great and powerful and generous God once chose to bring a new vision of holiness to the world in a form that no one had anticipated: as a *baby*. Maybe *every* time holiness appears, it comes as a gift we haven't even begun to imagine. As a gift we can hold only if our hands are empty and our hearts are open.