

Love Wins

Long Beach Alliance Church • December 20th, 2009 • Pastor Chris Lankford

We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

~1st John 4:16 (NASB)

1) The Great Gift Of Love

- A) The perfect picture of God's love is expressed in 1st Corinthians 13:4-8a exemplified in the life of Jesus Christ, who was sent to redeem "a people for His own possession" (Titus 2:14) as an expression of love (1st John 4:9).
- B) In Jesus Christ we see that the love of God initiates with mankind (John 4:7-42) and builds bridges of love which can support the truth of Jesus Christ (John 21).
- C) It is only when we abide in God's love (a day-to-day personal relationship with Jesus Christ) that we are able to authentically express love to others (1st John 4:11, 16).
- D) Like Jesus Christ's own life, this love can only enter in our lives through birth! Every person must be "born again" (re-born) as a follower of Jesus Christ. In order to experience God's love, we must respond to God's love by trusting our lives completely to Jesus Christ (John 3:16-18).

2) Faith, Hope, and Love

- A) Of all the character qualities of Jesus Christ which mankind experiences, “faith, hope, and love” are most significant (1st Corinthians 13:13).

- B) Abiding in faith pleases God (Hebrews 11:1 & 6), and by faith one has a relationship with Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). Trusting Jesus (faith) means living differently (James 2) as we are transformed by Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3).

- C) Abiding in hope means living our lives with the greatest confidence in Jesus Christ (1st Timothy 1:1, Titus 2:13). Trusting Jesus for salvation (faith) is lived out by an active hope in Him for daily living and the future (Hebrews 6:19).

- D) Of course, in all of the Christian life, if we lack love, our faith and hope are stripped of their vitality and our actions become like fingernails scratching down a school-room chalkboard (1st Corinthians 13:1).

- E) Love is the greatest of all Jesus Christ’s characteristics. It authenticates and gives life to the Christian. We are saved by God’s love through Jesus, and everyone who is loved by God and abides in God’s love will be an ambassador for Christ to the world (2nd Corinthians 5:20-21).

3) Love Wins!

- A) In the midst of an evil world, love broke forth in the birth of Jesus Christ (Luke 2:1-20) for the redemption of all those who would trust in Him (Colossians 1:13-14).

- B) Like Jesus, we are called to love so completely that we have no fear of where love will take our lives (1st John 4:17-18), but rest our confidence in Jesus Christ alone.

Engaging Advent

The word “Advent” comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means “the approach” or “the arrival.” The Latin verb is *advenio*: “I arrive. I come. I am coming.”

For centuries, followers of Jesus Christ have observed this season with a passionate anticipation of Christmas morning, marking the joy of the birth of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ. Growing up as a follower of Jesus Christ, I learned (very early) that celebrating certain aspects of the culture (e.g. Santa Claus) could be rather dangerous.

I remember one Christian telling me that if I rearranged Santa’s name it would spell ‘Satan.’ Interesting. Was that to imply that Santa was so distracting to the true meaning of Christmas, that he was actually Satan in disguise (and *he does* wear a red suit!)?

One Christian writer notes, “Santa is so much like what we’re trying to teach our children about God. Look at the “attributes” of Santa: he’s omniscient (he sees everything you do); he rewards you if you’re good; he’s omnipresent (he can be everywhere in one night); he gives you good gifts; he’s the famous “old man in the sky” figure... And does Santa really care if you were bad or good? Did the worst kid in town ever *not* get gifts from Santa? For this and other reasons, we choose to not include Santa Claus in our Christmas stories and decorations...”

Of course, everyone needs to seriously consider how much of a role cultural icons like Santa Claus (and other icons for other holidays) will play in our families. Our family has chosen to include Santa Claus in our celebrations, albeit in a limited manner. I have found this brief history of the origins of Santa Claus helpful...

“The model for Santa Claus was a fourth-century Christian bishop named Saint Nicholas. Little is known about the real Nicholas, except that he was probably the bishop of Lycia. In the Middle Ages, when it became popular to venerate saints, legends about Nicholas began to flourish. One said he had given three bags of gold to the daughters of a poor man so that the girls would not have to earn their dowries through prostitution. Another claimed he had miraculously restored three little boys to life after they had been cut up for bacon. Thus Nicholas became known as a giver of gifts and the patron saint of children. His day is December 6.

Nicholas was particularly popular in Holland. It is there that the customs linking Nicholas to Christmas seem to have first begun. Dutch children expected the friendly saint to visit them during the night on December 5, and they developed the custom of placing their wooden shoes by the fireplace to be filled with gifts. Santa Claus is the Americanization of his Dutch name, Sinterklaas.

Of course, by the time Santa Claus became a part of American lore, children had discovered that you can get a lot more gifts in a sock than you can in a wooden shoe, so that adjustment to the custom was made in the mid-nineteenth century.

Clement Moore, an American poet, may be more responsible than any other person for popularizing the myth of Santa Claus. He wrote “A Visit for St. Nicholas” in 1822 which begins with the famous line, “’Twas the night before Christmas,” and it was published in the Troy New York Sentinel. It was immediately popular and has endured ever since.”

I find it fascinating that so many of the customs which are associated with Christmas have come through a long and winding road of varied traditions. Sometimes, the traditions we follow even come from pagan backgrounds! Unlike Santa Claus, which has its origins in the church, Christmas trees find their origins in Saturnalia, a pagan

Roman feast (held around December 17th each year), which was in honor of the god of the sun, Saturn. In fact, around the time we call 'Christmastime' in Jesus' day, Saturnalia was being celebrated throughout the Roman Empire, including Roman occupied Israel. Pastor John MacArthur comments on the origins of the traditional Christmas tree...

"Christmas trees seem to have their origins in the ancient celebrations of Saturnalia. The Romans decorated their temples with greenery and candles. Roman soldiers conquering the British Isles found Druids who worshiped mistletoe and Saxons who used holly and ivy in religious ceremonies. All those things found their way into Christmas customs.

Interestingly, however, the first person to have lighted a Christmas tree may have been Martin Luther, father of the Reformation. He introduced the practice of putting candles on trees to celebrate Christmas, citing Isaiah 60:13 as biblical authority for the practice: "The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the juniper, the box tree, and the cypress together, to beautify the place of My sanctuary; and I shall make the place of My feet glorious." "

So here we are in 2009, most of us practicing different traditions in our own homes (like Santa Claus and Christmas Trees), which come from varied and different backgrounds and histories. One of the most interesting practices of ancient Christianity was to take those traditions which were meant for evil (paganism), and "redeem" the tradition for the sake of Jesus Christ.

I find this encouraging at Christmastime in my home. Jesus Christ is sent into a world which is dying from the effects of evil as a baby, for the express purpose of redeeming people for the Kingdom of Heaven. In our traditions and practices at Christmas, may each of us be redemptive in every possible manner so that the whole world will know Jesus through everything we do!

Advent Reading #4 ~ William Willimon

William Willimon is author of more than fifty books. He is a tremendously popular preacher, and is consistently listed as one of the best preachers in the English speaking world. Dr. Willimon is a bishop in the United Methodist Church serving in Alabama. He was formerly the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, and is also a graduate of Yale Divinity School.

The God We Hardly Knew

No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need even of God – for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God. Emmanuel. God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit there can be no abundance of God.

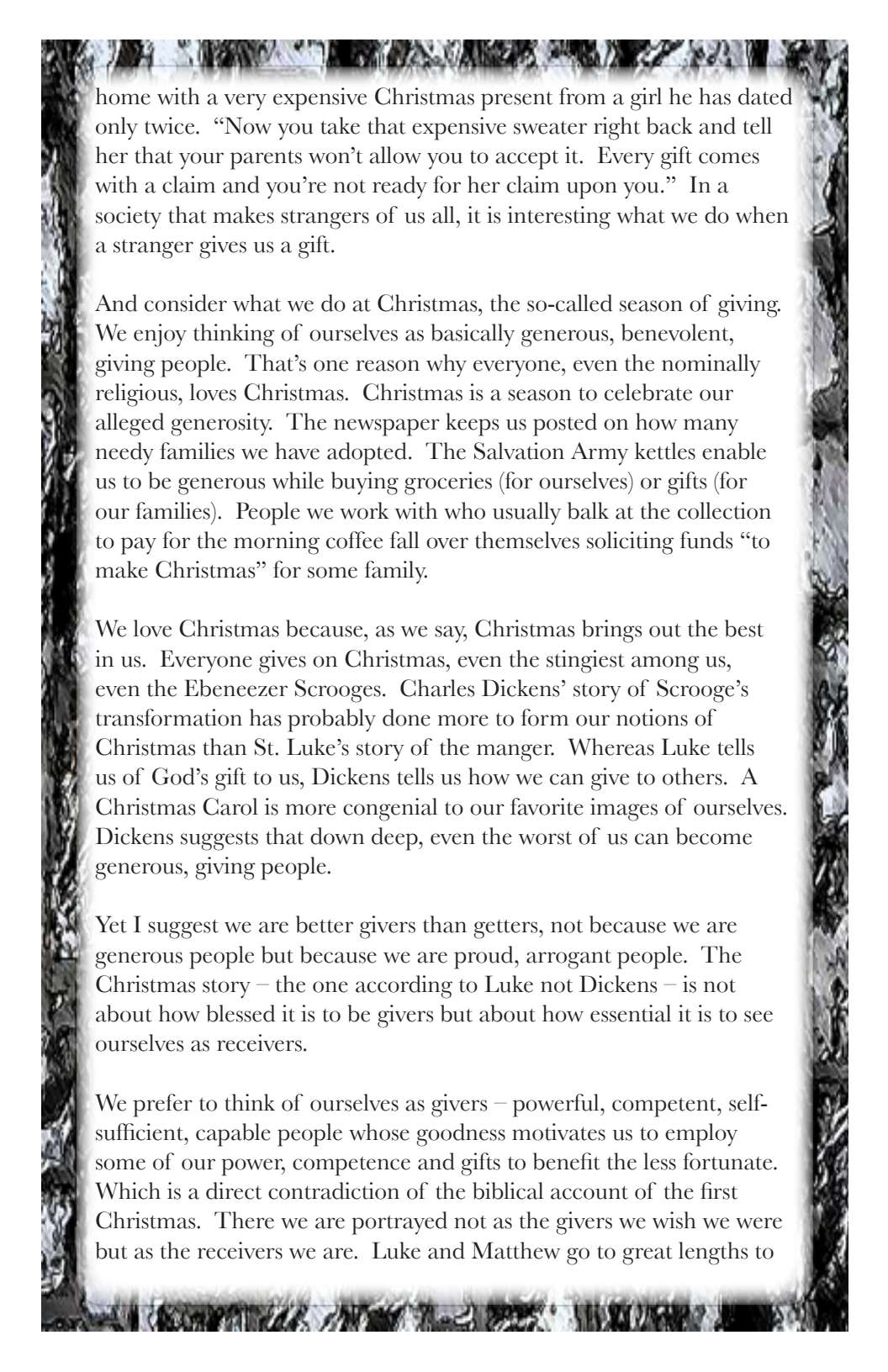
~Oscar Romero

PROBABLY MOST OF US have had the experience of receiving, right out of the blue, a gift from someone we really don't know all that well. And perhaps, to our consternation, the gift turns out to be nice, something that we didn't know we wanted and certainly didn't ask for, but there it is, a good gift from someone who is not really a good friend. Now, what is the first thing we do in response?

Right. We try to come up with a gift to give in return – not out of gratitude (after all we didn't ask for it) or out of friendship (after all we hardly knew this person), but because we don't want to feel guilty.

We don't want to be indebted. The gift seems to lay a claim upon us, especially since it has come from someone we barely know. This is uncomfortable; it's hard to look the person in the face until we have reciprocated. By giving us a gift, this person has power over us.

It may well be, as Jesus says, more blessed to give than to receive. But it is more difficult to receive. Watch how people blush when given a compliment. Watch what you do when your teen-aged son comes



home with a very expensive Christmas present from a girl he has dated only twice. “Now you take that expensive sweater right back and tell her that your parents won’t allow you to accept it. Every gift comes with a claim and you’re not ready for her claim upon you.” In a society that makes strangers of us all, it is interesting what we do when a stranger gives us a gift.

And consider what we do at Christmas, the so-called season of giving. We enjoy thinking of ourselves as basically generous, benevolent, giving people. That’s one reason why everyone, even the nominally religious, loves Christmas. Christmas is a season to celebrate our alleged generosity. The newspaper keeps us posted on how many needy families we have adopted. The Salvation Army kettles enable us to be generous while buying groceries (for ourselves) or gifts (for our families). People we work with who usually balk at the collection to pay for the morning coffee fall over themselves soliciting funds “to make Christmas” for some family.

We love Christmas because, as we say, Christmas brings out the best in us. Everyone gives on Christmas, even the stingiest among us, even the Ebenezer Scrooges. Charles Dickens’ story of Scrooge’s transformation has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than St. Luke’s story of the manger. Whereas Luke tells us of God’s gift to us, Dickens tells us how we can give to others. A Christmas Carol is more congenial to our favorite images of ourselves. Dickens suggests that down deep, even the worst of us can become generous, giving people.

Yet I suggest we are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people but because we are proud, arrogant people. The Christmas story – the one according to Luke not Dickens – is not about how blessed it is to be givers but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers.

We prefer to think of ourselves as givers – powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence and gifts to benefit the less fortunate. Which is a direct contradiction of the biblical account of the first Christmas. There we are portrayed not as the givers we wish we were but as the receivers we are. Luke and Matthew go to great lengths to

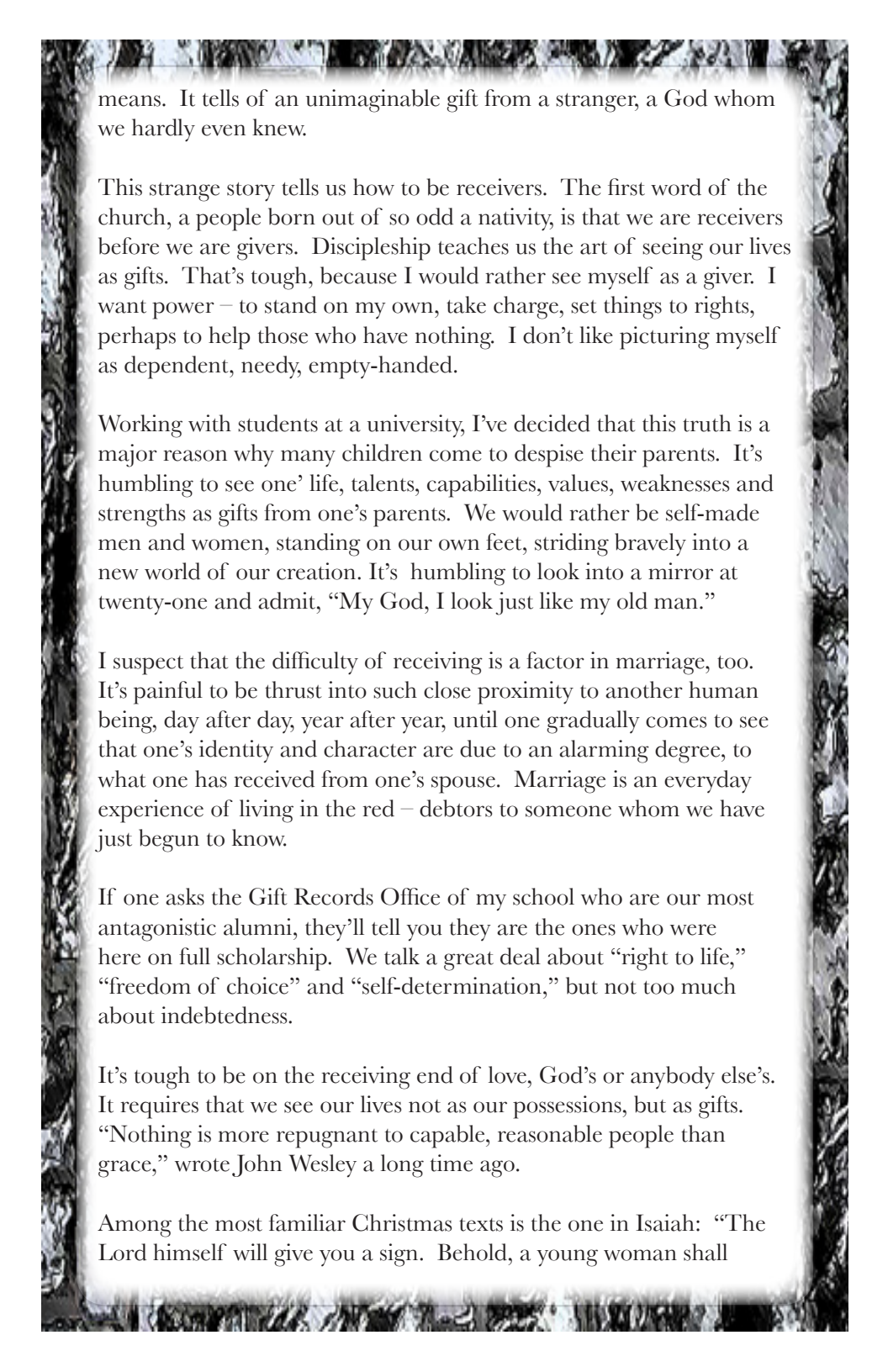
demonstrate that we – with our power, generosity, competence and capabilities – had little to do with God’s work in Jesus. God wanted to do something for us so strange, so utterly beyond the bounds of human imagination, so foreign to human projection, that God had to resort to angels, pregnant virgins, and stars in the sky to get it done. We didn’t think of it, understand it or approve it. All we could do, at Bethlehem, was receive it. A gift from a God we hardly even knew.

This theme struck me forcefully a few years ago while counseling someone from my church. It was December. She was telling me about her worry and confusion over a number of problems. Having taken several counseling courses in seminary, I knew how to be a good counselor. That is, I knew to keep quiet, listen patiently, ask questions, and offer no direct guidance. After I had given her ample opportunity to vent her feelings, I remarked as I had been taught: “I believe that you have the solution to your problems within you. I believe that down deep, you know what your real problem is and that you have the resources to handle it.”

You have heard the message before. One certainly does not have to come to church to hear this popular gospel: You have, within you, the solution to what ails you.

And then it hit me. It was the middle of December, late in Advent. In less than two weeks I would be standing in front of the congregation reading the nativity story from one of the Gospels, demonstrating through a strange story of a virgin birth to a peasant couple in Judea that the solution to what ails us has very little to do with us. After having tried for generations to cure what ails us, God reached for something inconceivable. God put on our back doorstep a solution so radical that many missed it.

Rabbi Michael Goldberg, in his book *Jews and Christians*, says that as a Jew he is impressed in reading Matthew’s account of the nativity by how utterly passive the actors are. As a Jew, he answers to the story of the Exodus, a story of how God liberated the chosen people through the enlistment and prodding of people like Moses, Aaron and Miriam. But the Christmas story implies that what God wants to do for us is so strange, so beyond the bounds of human effort and striving, that God must resort to utterly unnatural, supernatural



means. It tells of an unimaginable gift from a stranger, a God whom we hardly even knew.

This strange story tells us how to be receivers. The first word of the church, a people born out of so odd a nativity, is that we are receivers before we are givers. Discipleship teaches us the art of seeing our lives as gifts. That's tough, because I would rather see myself as a giver. I want power – to stand on my own, take charge, set things to rights, perhaps to help those who have nothing. I don't like picturing myself as dependent, needy, empty-handed.

Working with students at a university, I've decided that this truth is a major reason why many children come to despise their parents. It's humbling to see one's life, talents, capabilities, values, weaknesses and strengths as gifts from one's parents. We would rather be self-made men and women, standing on our own feet, striding bravely into a new world of our creation. It's humbling to look into a mirror at twenty-one and admit, "My God, I look just like my old man."

I suspect that the difficulty of receiving is a factor in marriage, too. It's painful to be thrust into such close proximity to another human being, day after day, year after year, until one gradually comes to see that one's identity and character are due to an alarming degree, to what one has received from one's spouse. Marriage is an everyday experience of living in the red – debtors to someone whom we have just begun to know.

If one asks the Gift Records Office of my school who are our most antagonistic alumni, they'll tell you they are the ones who were here on full scholarship. We talk a great deal about "right to life," "freedom of choice" and "self-determination," but not too much about indebtedness.

It's tough to be on the receiving end of love, God's or anybody else's. It requires that we see our lives not as our possessions, but as gifts. "Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace," wrote John Wesley a long time ago.

Among the most familiar Christmas texts is the one in Isaiah: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall

conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel” “Isaiah 7:14). Less familiar is its context: Isaiah has been pleading with King Ahaz to put his trust in God’s promise to Israel rather than in alliances with strong military powers like Syria. “If you will not believe, you shall not be established,” Isaiah warns Ahaz (7:9). Then the prophet tells the fearful king that God is going to give him a baby as a sign. A baby. Isn’t that just like God, Ahaz must have thought. What Ahaz needed, with Assyria breathing down his neck, was a good army, not a baby.

This is often the way God loves us: with gifts we thought we didn’t need, which transform us into people we don’t necessarily want to be. With our advanced degrees, armies, government programs, material comforts and self-fulfillment techniques, we assume that religion is about giving a little of our power in order to confirm to ourselves that we are indeed as self-sufficient as we claim.

Then this stranger comes to us, blesses us with a gift, and calls us to see ourselves as we are – empty-handed recipients of a gracious God who, rather than leave us to our own devices, gave us a baby.

Advent Notes

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