

The Gift and His Gifts

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[0 : 00] Let us pray. Spirit of the living God, we believe that long ago you inspired the words we just read.

And now I pray in your mercy and grace that you will draw us into the reality of which these words speak as never before. For we pray it in Jesus' name. Amen.

To us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. What a joy to be able to gather on this Lord's Day and celebrate the miracle and mystery that is Christmas.

For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. There are so many different texts of Scripture to which we could turn this morning in order to understand the miracle and mystery of Christmas.

And then to understand how the miracle and mystery of Christmas speaks to all that is going on in our individual lives, in the life of this church, and in the life of the world at this tumultuous time in history.

[1 : 17] But this Christmas morning, I invite you to give your attention to the words from the prophet Isaiah we just heard read. When Tim Kipfer asked me months ago now to preach on this day, my mind and heart immediately went to Isaiah.

To chapter 9, verses 2 through 7. Very familiar words.

The last time Christmas day fell on Sunday. Seven years ago in 2009. So I backed off and began to pray about preaching another text on the incarnation.

But I kept being pulled to Isaiah 9. Then, Abraham Han preached the text a couple of weeks ago. Very well, if I may say.

And again, I backed off and began to pray about another text to preach. But again, I kept being pulled to Isaiah 9. For to us, a child is born.

[2 : 46] To us, a son is given. The fact is, Isaiah gives us the most complete interpretation of the Christmas events in all of Scripture.

Telling us who was born in Bethlehem that day. And telling us what he was born to do in the world. And the amazing thing is, Isaiah gives this interpretation nearly 600 years before the event.

Before the birth. Not that Isaiah sees all that we now see. Not that Isaiah sees Mary and Joseph making their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Not that Isaiah sees the virgin place her firstborn son in a manger. Not that Isaiah sees shepherds and wise men being drawn to the child. But Isaiah sees 600 years in advance.

He sees who this child is and what the son is given to do in the world. In particular, Isaiah sees that the child, the son, is no ordinary human being.

[4 : 01] A human being, yes, truly flesh and blood like you and me. But not only truly flesh and blood. For no mere human being was ever given the names, the child, the son, Isaiah sees given.

And no mere human being was ever thought to accomplish what this child, what this son was born, was given to accomplish in and for the world.

For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given. The good news we celebrate every Christmas, on whatever day it falls, is this.

To everyone on this planet, the most glorious gift imaginable has been given. I'll say it again. To everyone on this planet, the most glorious gift imaginable has been given.

No other gift we were given last night or this morning can ever compare with it. Not everyone yet knows that they've been given it.

[5 : 13] And not everyone who knows they've been given it has yet taken hold of it and opened it. But the glorious gift has been given. For to us, a child is born.

To us, a son is given. To us, a child is born. It's what the angels declared to the shepherds on the first Christmas Eve. Remember? Do not be afraid.

I bring you good news of a great joy. For in the city of David today, there has been born for you a Savior who is Messiah, the Lord. Born for you.

Echoing that 600-year-old promise. Born for you. A child was born for you. To us, a son is given. Given.

No one ever says that about the birth of a child. Given. Hey, everyone. We want you to know that last night a son was given to us.

[6 : 13] Yes, a son or a daughter was entrusted to us. So given in that sense. At 6.34 a.m. at Vancouver Children's Hospital, a child was entrusted to us.

Mother and child are well. Thanks be to God. But not given to us. For one thing, that sounds too possessive. And for another, it raises the question.

By whom? Given. By whom? And why? Given. By whom? For what reason? To us, a child is born.

To us, a son is given. By whom? And for what reason? All this to say is that the great gift of Christmas is a person.

A person. Not a new set of redemptive rules to live by. Although that gift we could probably use in our society right now. Not a new program for bringing health and prosperity to the world.

[7 : 15] Although that wouldn't be bad either. Not a grand unifying idea. A theory of everything. Although, again, we could greatly benefit from such a gift. No.

The gift is a person. The great and glorious gift of Christmas is a person. You're going to hear me say it many times today. Because it's so easily forgotten.

The gift is a person. A living, breathing person. Jesus. Son of Mary. Son of God. A person. Son of Mary. John 3.16 is probably the most famous text in scripture.

God so loved the world that he gave. Gave. That's because love gives. God so loved. God who is loved. So loves.

He gives. A rule book? A self-help guide? A new philosophical system? No. He gives a person. Imagine a gift under the Christmas tree.

[8 : 13] You go over to the box and you begin to carefully unwrap it and out comes a person. Well, that is what Christmas is all about. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

A person. God's most precious possession. God the father's greatest delight from all eternity. To us a child is born. To us a son is given.

He is the great gift of Christmas. Given to everyone around the globe. God. Not everyone realizes it yet.

And not everyone who has heard the news has bothered to actually take and open it. Not everyone yet has welcomed the person and opened him. But he has been given to everyone.

A person who cannot just be named by one name. That's what Isaiah wants us to know this Christmas morning. The child in Mary's arms.

[9 : 20] The son that Joseph adores cannot be captured in one name. You are to give him the name Jesus. The angel said it to Mary. The angel said it to Joseph.

Jesus. In Hebrew, it's Yeshua. Which means Yahweh himself to the rescue. But even that great name is not enough. 600 years before Jesus is born.

Before he is given. Isaiah hears other names he will be given. These other names actually explain why he's given the name Jesus. Five names.

Wonderful. Counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father. Prince of Peace. And here's the deal. In Isaiah's day, none of those names, none of those names, would ever have been given to a mere human being.

Not even to the loftiest human beings. To kings or to emperors. All human monarchs were too fallible to receive these names.

[10 : 30] The fact is, all the names that Isaiah hears and speaks imply divine status. They are worthy only of the one who is more than a human being.

And here's the shocker. As one scholar points out. Isaiah speaks these names at a birth, not at a coronation. The child, the son, is given these divine names simply because he is.

Not because he's exalted to the throne. His name is wonderful. Isaiah uses that word all over his massive work, but only of God.

Only of the living God. No one else is called wonderful in Isaiah, but God. Wonderful. It means full of wonder. It means full of glory.

It means incomprehensible. It means supernatural. The child who is born, the son who is given, is a wonder, a supernatural, incomprehensible wonder.

[11 : 38] And when we read the four gospels, do we not see this wonder lived out before us in dazzling color? There simply is no one like Jesus.

And his name is counselor. Someone to whom to turn for wisdom. Someone who embodies insight, discernment, and truth. Someone who will tell the truth in a post-truth world.

Who knows the truth. Who is truth itself. Someone who will lead us into the very counsels of God. Someone who will help us see the world the way God sees it.

Someone who will help us understand all the upheaval in the world the way God understands it. Someone who knows humanity through and through. Someone who knows God through and through.

And is this not what we see when we read the gospels? Jesus, the counselor, the wonderful counselor, full of wisdom, incredibly wise. Even those who opposed him had to say he was incredibly wise.

[12 : 42] Not only inherently so, but also because he's living in the thick of life. He's living our life. He knows where we live and he knows how to make life work where we live.

Open the gift of the gift. Let Jesus teach you how to be human. Let Jesus teach you how to be a husband or a wife. Let Jesus teach you how to be a parent.

Let Jesus teach you how to run your business. Oh, that the leaders of our world would open this Christmas gift this Christmas and bring in the counselor of counselors.

Bring Jesus into the cabinet meeting. Let Jesus speak to parliament. Let Jesus teach city hall how to make the city work. His name is Mighty God.

Mighty God. Here we have to slow down and say the words very slowly. Mighty God. Mighty God.

[13 : 48] The child lying in Mary's arms. Mighty God. The son Joseph rocks in the cradle. Mighty God. Isaiah uses this word also all over his massive work, but again, only of the living God.

Mighty God. In Hebrew, it's El Gabor. No one would ever name their child El Gabor. It's too audacious. More to the point, it's too blasphemous.

El, God, Gabor, hero, warrior, champion, strong one. Like God, the child who is born to us possesses great strength, strength to deliver.

Mighty God. No wonder Isaiah earlier in his work calls the virgin conceived child Emmanuel, which means God with us. No wonder the angel tells Joseph to call Mary's son Emmanuel, God with us.

Literally so. Literally. God with us. He is all that his name implies. Which is why there are so many stories in the four gospels where people meet Jesus and find themselves wanting to worship him.

[14 : 59] right from the beginning. Wise men from the east. They find Jesus in Bethlehem and they fall to their knees in adoration. And when we see this happen, we're supposed to say to the wise men, no, no, no, no.

Do not do that. Do not worship anyone else but God. Worship God. And the wise men turn to us and say, yeah, we know that. That is what we're doing.

Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity as we sang earlier. God from God, light from God, light, true God from true God as the Nicene Creed would put it centuries after the first Christmas.

His name is Everlasting Father. Makes sense given that he's mighty God. Literally, it is Father of Eternity or Father of all futures.

Possessor of eternity. The source of life, past, present, and future. Feel the paradox of this. Feel the mystery of this. The one who lived before time now enters time.

[16 : 05] The one who caused children to be born is now born a child. The one who begets is begotten. He is the source and goal of all of life. Jesus, Father of Eternity.

And his name is Prince of Peace. Nowhere in the rest of Isaiah, nowhere in the rest of the Bible is anyone called Prince of Peace.

Peacemaker, peacekeeper, but not Prince of Peace. Prince, ruler, peace, shalom, ruler of shalom. No one was ever called that.

No one's going to give their child the name Ruler of Shalom. No one could be given that name. It means the one who ushers in and administers the shalom of God.

You might know that shalom means more than the absence of war. It means the presence of wholeness. It means the presence of healing. It means the fullness of the kingdom of God. The child born to us, the son given to us, brings that great peace because he is shalom itself.

[17 : 11] Tell us Jesus' names. Again, Isaiah, wonderful, counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace.

That is the great gift of Christmas. He is the glorious gift of Christmas. A person, a person with so many names because no one name captures who he is.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift. The apostle Paul would tell the Corinthians, indescribable indeed, beyond knowing and speaking and writing.

But Paul's word, indescribable, can be rendered yet to be fully opened. Thanks be to God for his yet to be fully opened gift.

Which is why as we grow in relationship with Jesus, we keep learning more. no one has yet fully grasped who he is. We'll be opening this gift the rest of our lives.

[18 : 12] And as we keep opening it, opening him, there will be more gifts to open. The glorious gift brings with him more gifts.

The Magi brought gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The child, the son, also brought gifts. Which is why the apostle Paul would later ask with great joy, he who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not with him give us all things?

Answer, yes. With the greatest gift of Christmas, God gives us other gifts. Isaiah saw five gifts.

Five names, five gifts. The fifth gift is the one I especially want to open today. First gift, light.

Isaiah 9, 2. The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light, but of course, how could it be otherwise? He who is full of wonder shines.

[19 : 23] Jesus shines. He's the radiance of God's glory, as Keith read earlier, inherently radiant and radiating, shining in the darkness. But not only shining in from outside the darkness, shining from within the darkness.

He's born into the darkness. He enters the darkness, our deepest darkness, and from deep within, he begins to shine away the darkness. He moves into all the dark corners of our lives, slowly filling them with light, healing light, cleansing light.

He moves into all the places of confusion, the places where we have bought lies and deceit, and brings us into liberating light. And he can bring the light because he is the light.

I'm the light of the world, he would later say. And as the apostle John says, the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. Open the gift. Because of Christmas Day, darkness will not have the last word anymore.

Second gift, joy. Isaiah 9, 3. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased their gladness, they will be glad in your presence.

[20 : 35] He is born into our world of sorrow to bring us his joy. He enters our sorrow to bring us joy. He enters our deepest sorrow, our disappointments, our griefs, our despair, our rejections and regrets, and brings us into joy.

Even if the circumstances do not change, he brings us into joy. Because he is joy. Weeping may last for the night, the psalmist says, but joy comes in the morning.

Because Jesus comes in the morning. He really wants us to have joy. His joy. His joy, which no circumstance can rob. I know. Time and again, I've been surprised by joy.

In situations of profound sorrow, he sneaks up and he gives joy. It is his prayer. Father, I want my joy to be made full in them.

Open the gift. Because of Christmas Day, sorrow will not have the last word. Light, joy, third gift, freedom.

[21 : 44] Isaiah 9, 4. You have broken the yoke of their burden and the staff on their shoulders and the rod of their oppressors. Wonderful counselor enters any and all forms of oppression and breaks their yokes.

Mighty God enters any and all forms of bondage and breaks their yokes. Isaiah is likely thinking in political terms about political oppression.

He likely has in mind the power of Assyria and Babylon. But as Jesus will make clear, behind those oppressors are more sinister oppressors. Sin, evil, and death.

And Jesus walks right into the face of all those forces and overcomes those oppressors behind all oppression. Read the Gospel of Mark sometime.

On page after page, you will find Jesus facing the forces that seek to undo us. And you'll see him win. He faces sin and overcomes it. He faces evil, he overcomes it.

[22 : 49] He faces death and mercy, he overcomes it. After all, according to Luke, when Jesus began his public ministry, he read another text from Isaiah, the Spirit of the Lord is upon me for he has sent me to announce release to the captives.

any form of captivity, Jesus can release it from us. Nothing that has a hold on us is too strong for mighty God.

Nothing. Oh, that we would open this gift. Oh, that our world would factor Jesus into the equation. The opioid, the opioid crisis is horrific.

Fentanyl is killing too many people. over 700 people have died in BC this last year. Four people a day over the last weeks. Jesus can bring freedom.

Do you believe that? Yes, we need more doctor-supervised treatment centers. Yes, we need more follow-up programs. Yes, we need more help for first responders.

[23 : 53] And yes, we need more nurses in the ER. But what we really need is Jesus. He can make a difference. He can fix it. He can fix me.

He can fix you. You can tell, I want to cry it out to the whole city. Open the gift. Oh, dear people, open the gift. Because of Christmas Day, oppression, addiction, bondage, do not have the last word.

Light, joy, freedom, a fourth gift, peace. Isaiah 9, 5. For every boot of the booted wire in the battle tumult, and every cloak rolled in blood will be for burning, fuel for the fire.

The Prince of Peace is born into all the hostility and strife. The ruler of Shalom walks into all the hatred and violence to bring us into peace.

He makes peace with us and God, and he makes peace between us and us. Again, if the world would only factor Jesus into the equation, I watch what is going on in our world right now, and I grieve.

[25 : 03] Not only because of the almostprecedented level of violence and chaos, but because if we would just invite Jesus into the mess, he could work the miracle of peace.

If the leaders of our world would just invite Jesus in, if the leaders of our city would just give Jesus a chance, peace would have a chance.

You know that the world is now paying the price of our secular vision of reality. We've left out of the picture the only one who has what it takes to make peace. If I could meet with President-elect Donald Trump, I would say to him, Mr. Trump, you claim to believe in Jesus.

Wonderful. Please invite Jesus into the picture. If I could meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin, I would say, Mr. Putin, you too claim to believe in Jesus.

You were baptized. You wear a cross around your neck. Wonderful. Please invite Jesus into the picture. I would make the same appeal to Prime Minister Trudeau and to Premier Clark and to Mayor Robertson.

[26 : 14] The same appeal. Just give Jesus a chance. I know it sounds naive. I know. I know. None of you have to tell me it sounds naive. I know.

But it's not naive. It's the most rational thing we ought to do given what Christmas is all about. Jesus, the Prince of Peace, can make it work.

He is our peace. He is peace itself. Open the gift. Because of Christmas Day, hostility and revenge and violence and war will not have the last word.

light, joy, freedom, peace and one more gift, fifth gift, I simply call it relief.

Relief from carrying the burden of the world on our shoulders. Isaiah 9, 6 and the government shall be on his shoulders.

[27 : 14] No longer on ours. Now on his. On the shoulders of wonderful. On the shoulders of counselor. On the shoulders of mighty God.

On the shoulders of everlasting father. On the shoulders of the Prince of Peace. not on ours. The government on his shoulders. This is the gift I especially celebrate today.

This is what has sustained me over the last year. The government is now on the shoulders of the child who is born to us. On the son who is given to us.

The government of what? The whole world. The whole cosmos. On his shoulders. Not ours. Martin Luther, the great reformer, put it this way in one of his Christmas Day sermons.

Christ's kingdom is not under his feet. It's on his shoulders. And here's the miracle of Christmas. In order to take it on his shoulders, he has to bend over.

[28 : 21] Bend down. Low. Very low. He comes down. Down. Down. Very down. All the way down. And bends down in order to get under.

This is why wonderful, counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace became a human. To be with us, yes, but more to get under us.

In our flesh and blood. Under us. Under the weight of sin. Under the weight of evil. Under the weight of death. Under the weight of our fears.

Under the weight of all our longings. Taking on himself. All that it means to be human in a broken world. Making it all his own. Slipping it on his shoulders.

Carrying it all from those 30 years he lived on the earth. Then carrying it up to the cross. And then on Easter morning, carrying us into his new world. Do you hear what Isaiah is telling us this morning?

[29 : 21] The destiny of the world does not rest on the shoulders of Donald Trump. Or of Vladimir Putin. Or of Justin Trudeau.

Or of Xi Jinping. Just as it did not rest on the shoulders of Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great on the first Christmas day. Or on any shoulders of any world leaders who have come since the first Christmas day.

The destiny of the world rests on the shoulders of Jesus Christ. The destiny of this church does not rest on the shoulders of any members of its staff or any new pastor the Lord will lead to this church.

The destiny of your children and grandchildren does not rest on your shoulders. Once you open the glorious gift of Christmas, your destiny does not rest on your own shoulders.

From life's first cry to final breath, Jesus commands my destiny. Because of Christmas day, none of us need carry the weight of the world anymore.

[30 : 25] Oh, the miracle and mystery of Christmas. For to us, a child is born. To us, a son is given.

I love how C.S. Lewis put it in his book, Miracles, and with this I conclude. In the Christian story, God comes down. Down from the heights of absolute being, into time and space, down into humanity, down to the very roots, and seabed of nature he has created.

But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world with him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself under some great complicated burden.

He must stoop in order to lift. He almost disappears under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole load swaying on his shoulders.

Let us pray. If you're here today and you have never opened the glorious Christmas gift, may I invite you to do so right now?

[31 : 53] All you need to do is say something like this. I don't get everything I just heard. But I get that you've given us a person.

And so, I say to you, Jesus, Jesus, I want you. I welcome you.

I invite you to then say, shine your light into any dark place in my soul.

And I invite you to say, bring your joy into any sad place in my soul.

and to say, bring your freedom into any place in my soul that's in bondage.

[33 : 16] and to say, bring your peace into any place in my soul that is full of strife.

And then to say, Jesus, I would like to live the rest of my life carried on your shoulders.

and I would like to the rest of my Lord and drive on your out.

And if you get to leave a dwelling and everyone I would like to do that.