

What We Really Want for Christmas

John 1: 1-5, 14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it...

... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Turn on the television some night and maybe you will catch him stealing Christmas. Snagging stockings on the fireplace. Vacuuming up tinsel and treetops into his sack. The song we sing about him says his heart is an empty hole and his soul is full of garlic. And the three words which describe him best are, and I quote, "stink, stank, stunk." Of course, we know who this cranky, gift-stealing, sour-souled character is: it's the Grinch. And remember what they say is the reason the Grinch acts this way: it is because his heart is too small. It's the size of a pea with no room left for love or joy.

I thought about the Grinch a lot this week as the virus threatens to steal Christmas joy. As the grief of 315,000 lives perished (1.7 million worldwide) shadows the yuletide. As not being able to gather with family or church robs us of the sentimental feelings. And after all that we have endured in 2020, perhaps if we're honest, it is difficult to have room left for much of anything else.

The truth is though, for most of us, even on a normal year Christmas consumes a lot of space. The time we spend stringing up lights around the gutters. Picking out trees and pulling out ornaments from the attic. Soliciting lists from family members and trying to think of things we want—which seems to get harder as the years go by. Then we sort through the ads or go filling our carts on Amazon. In our house, we have packages arriving on the doormat almost every day—our FedEx person knows our house quite well. We are privileged. We have so much, there is hardly any room under the tree. Then come January we get the credit card bill. And with it is the Christmas hangover from all the spending. Every year, Covid-19 or not, the season consumes a lot of time, energy, money.

So here's the question: Do we really get what we want for Christmas? Maybe if we are a child we do. But for those of us who are older and have lived through Christmas year after year, I wonder if sometimes we spend all this time and money as a temporary fix for a deeper yearning. After the paper is ripped off the package and the ribbons lie all over the floor, if you're anything like me, is there still not a part that feels unfulfilled? It is as if there is this empty space longing for something more. Now maybe this year we would be satisfied with

getting the vaccine, or getting back to normal, or at least being able to gather again. Surely, that would lift our Christmas spirits. But even then, I wonder if the empty spot would feel filled.

Turn to the gospel and there at the beginning is God's gift to us. The word of God's promise gift-wrapped in flesh. He is the light for all nations that will shine brightly on the foolishness of our ways. He is to be our hope in dark times, and he will serve up peace with our morning coffee—that's the promise. And as we read the words, we get a sense that the promise must take on our humanity if it is to mean anything at all. And that God's greatest wish is to take up residence in our lives...that is, if there is enough room.

I'll admit, sometimes I wonder where God is dwelling these days. But then I hear about the Dairy Queen in Minnesota whose customers paid it forward—buying ice cream for the car behind them—that lasted 72 hours and 900 cars (in Minnesota!). Or I hear about the Black family who received threatening phone calls after putting up a Black Santa in their front yard. And how after the neighbors heard about it, the next morning Black Santa's were put up in every yard, as far as the eye could see. And I can see God's Spirit moving into the neighborhood. A light shining in the darkness. The Word becoming flesh and living among us.

You see, I think all God really wants for Christmas is to share the gift of God's presence with us, so we can share it with others. And then we might discover that the empty space within us has a purpose—it leaves room. After all, it's the gift we've been preparing for.

Maybe you saw the advertisement about an old man who wakes up a bit down, but then gets an inspired idea. He runs out to his shed in the backyard and pulls out from the junk pile an old rusty kettle ball. He dusts it off and bends over to pick it up, but can only pull it an inch off the ground. The next morning, the alarm clock buzzes, and he tries again. This time he can move it up to his waist. The alarm clock goes off the next morning and he is back out in the shed trying again. His neighbors start to wonder what all the grunting and groaning coming from the backyard is about. One day he wants to give up, but out of determination he puts on his workout jumpsuit and keeps at it. Eventually, he's pulling the weight up and then pressing it out. Every day, he is out there getting into shape: pulling the weight up and then pressing out.

Finally, it is Christmas. So he gets fancied up in his best suit, grabs a small giftbox with a golden bow on top and drives over the hills and through the snow to be with his family. When he walks through the door he gives his daughter a hug and then he sees her. Coming down the stairs in her Christmas dress is his young granddaughter. He hands her the box with the golden bow on it and inside is a bright, shiny star for the top of Christmas tree. Then he bends down, picks the child up and presses her out so she can place the star on top. All that time. All those days in the shed...he was preparing for the gift. It was what he wanted for Christmas.

Beloved, how much more does God desire to gift us. To pick us up and help us shine, so we in turn can lift up others and help them shine. Is it not the gift we've been preparing for this whole time?

It's why we prep gift bags for underserved families at Bolton School. We make room in our hearts for others with sharing canned goods. It's why we keep opening up ourselves to justice-seeking opportunities. So God's light can fill us up and take up residence in our lives. And maybe for a moment that empty spot within us will feel full. And then, we will have known what we really want for Christmas. Amen.