The Best Gifts are the Gifts of God
The Rt. Rev. John S. Smylie

On Christmas morning, when I was little, my siblings and I were not allowed to go downstairs until mom and dad gave us permission to do so. We were fortunate to live in a beautiful home in Summit, New Jersey. I was the only one of six children with a room on the third floor; the rest had rooms on the second floor. I was allowed to come down my stairs to the second floor, but none of us were allowed down the other flight of stairs leading to our hallway and living room.

There were not many signs of Christmas in the house back then. I don’t even remember having an Advent wreath, but I do remember attending church on Christmas Eve. We would go to the eleven o’clock evening service where we would sing Christmas carols and I would enjoy the sweet scent of fresh pine inside the sanctuary.

Our house was not filled with Christmas television specials like Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer or Frosty the Snowman. The only show on television that my dad would allow us to watch was the burning of the Yule Log. Occasionally we would see a fresh log placed on the fire while we listened to Christmas music in the background. The tree in our living room would be undecorated when we went to sleep on Christmas Eve and then magically come to life Christmas morning.

We would wait on the stairs until one of us was chosen to go into the living room to turn on the Christmas tree lights that appeared on the tree while we slept. I don’t ever recall being the lucky one chosen for this task, as I was the youngest boy in the family. When we were finally released from our perch on the staircase we would enter the living room where there would be gifts for each of us. We would always open our gifts one at a time watching each other receive whatever it was that was wrapped so carefully.

I don’t know why, but I’ve always liked digging into my stocking the most. Perhaps it was the randomness of it all, but more than the little gifts inside I believe the stocking was a reminder to me of the small, everyday blessings that continue to bring so much meaning and joy to my heart and soul. The simple, little treasures that would be found inside remind me of the simple pleasures that are around us everyday when we allow ourselves to be open to them. A balsa wood glider, a candy bar, some chapstick, a fingernail clipper, funny wonderful little things, housed in a needlepoint stocking made by my mother, joy after joy after joy.

Every year on Christmas Eve, before church, my parents would open a gift from a business associate of my dad’s. Each year they were given a prized piece of glass in the shape of a cat, an alligator, a bowl or some other treasure. I always loved watching them open that gift together. Now, as I reflect on Christmas I see it’s not the stuff that matters, but rather the relationships that are nourished as adults become childlike.

Ultimately, it seems to me now that Christmas is about caring. I believe the best gifts we have to give are just like the best gifts of God. God gave of himself when he sent his Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to be one of us. I know the best gift that I can receive or will ever receive is the gift of another’s grace, kindness, thoughtfulness, and love.

So perhaps this Christmas and this year we can confidently give of ourselves because each of us are made in the image and likeness of God and the best gift we can give to another is the gift of authentic self, the gift of God’s grace within us. So let us give ourselves away to God’s purpose and to one another and let us find the treasure that comes with giving.

Blessings, God’s blessings upon you always!

Warmly, John