

**Christmas Eve: 12/24/17**  
**St. Paul: Luxemburg, WI**  
**Text: Luke 2:11**  
**Theme: God's Gift**

You have put a lot into preparing for Christmas up to this point. I suspect that you have endured varying degrees of stress getting ready for this night. You have fought the crowds at the stores. You have worked tirelessly getting things in order for Christmas dinner. You have decorated and spent countless hours preparing. If you have kids, you have worked hard to make sure that this will be a Christmas that they remember. Here, tonight, I want this to be a time when you forget about all of that. At this point, the presents are purchased, the tree is up, the decorating is done. I want this to be a time for you when you forget about all of those other things and just sit back and behold God's gift to you.

Christmas is one of those occasions in life that you remember. Think back on all of the Christmases that you have experienced over the years. I would be willing to bet that you can remember an awful lot of them. If you are young enough, I would be willing to bet that you can remember all of them as far back as you have memories. Which Christmas would you rate as being your best Christmas? We do indeed have some Christmases that we consider to be a lot better than other Christmases. Think about the criteria that you use for rating Christmas.

Now, I have to tell you that I like to think that everyone would say that they rate their Christmas based on the Christmas Eve church service. I like to think that people would say, "Oh yeah, I remember the sermon preached back in two thousand and fourteen. That was the best Christmas ever!" But I don't believe that is probably the case. Why don't I believe that? Because I'm not completely detached from all reality whatsoever.

So, what is it that you rate your Christmas upon? What is it, as you think of past Christmases, that makes some stand out more than others? Well, I would be willing to bet that for everyone here, to some extent, it is gifts. I know that is especially true when I talk to younger folks, and I don't think it changes that much for people as they get older. I can still remember the Christmas when I was a kid and I got a small black and white television for my room. That was a really big deal back in nineteen seventy eight! I have heard people talk in the past about getting a car for Christmas. I remember talking to a family about the year when they got their son a puppy for Christmas. They talked about smuggling the dog into the house and keeping him quiet until the right time. I would be willing to bet that individual will rate that as his best Christmas for all of his life. What about you?

Well, Christmas is all about gifts. I know that's not exactly what you expect to hear when you come to church, is it?

The truth of the matter is that if you sit back and think about it you can remember an awful lot of Christmas sermons that talked about the evils of presents and going overboard on gift giving. But you haven't heard those sermons from me. It is certainly true that gift giving and consumerism can be sinful, can't they? When we become distracted from what gifts are supposed to remind us of and lose sight of Jesus, they do indeed become a problem. But that does not change the fact that Christmas is all about gifts. It is first and foremost about God's gift to you. All of the other gift giving that goes on at this time of the year is to be a reminder to us of God's Christmas gift to us.

We see that in our text for this evening. We see the shepherds out in their fields on that first Christmas Eve. What were they expecting that night? Not very much! The sheep were settled down for the night, and I am sure that the shepherds were expecting a long boring night ahead of them. After all, boring would have been a very good thing for them that night. Boring meant that nothing happened. If there was excitement, it would almost certainly mean that there was a thief coming to try and steal sheep or a wild animal coming to tear the sheep to pieces. Excitement for the shepherds would mean confrontation and possibly hostility. They were expecting and hoping for boring.

But then something exciting happens. The angel of the Lord appears to them. The angel comes with the greatest news imaginable. The angel comes and tells them that God is giving them a gift. This gift is a surprise in a good way. What is this gift? The angel tells them that a Savior has been born to them in the city of Bethlehem. This was the greatest gift ever! This was a gift that had been promised for hundreds and hundreds of years. Ever since the fall into sin by Adam and Eve, God had promised that He was going to send a Savior. He had told His people that the Savior would one day come and pay for the sins of all people that all people might be saved through Him. The Savior had finally come.

Have you ever gotten a gift that you didn't quite understand? I'm not necessarily the greatest appreciator of art. When I finished my vicarage year, the congregation that I had served gave me a picture. I remember opening the thing, looking at it, politely smiling, and then holding the picture for a photo. I still have the picture of me holding that picture. The problem is that even though I put on a really good show I had no idea what it was supposed to be. My supervisor walked over after the picture was taken and turned the picture. I was holding it upside down.

I wonder if those shepherds understood the gift that they had received there that night? The truth of the matter is that

we fail at times to understand God's gift to us. We must not understand because otherwise we would treasure it more highly. The truth of the matter is that all too often God's gift of a Savior tends to be discarded and forgotten like so many other gifts that we receive. The gift of a Savior isn't always something that is at the center of our lives. We know how easily gifts tend to be forgotten very quickly after Christmas. Parents know that all too well. How often does Jesus end up that way for us? How many people that we see here tonight will already have forgotten God's gift to them by next Sunday? How easily will we go back to living our lives next week as if we had not received the greatest gift ever? How often do we fail to understand the gift that we have received?

God has given you the greatest gift ever. This is the gift of salvation itself. This child whose birth we celebrate on this night was coming into this world so that He could suffer and die for your sins. He was coming so that He might open the way to heaven itself for you. Not only that, He was coming so that you might know that God Himself dwells with you even now.

A short time back I read about a pastor visiting a member of his congregation who had a daughter who was dying from cancer. It was right before Christmas. Lois talked to the pastor about all of the Christmas cards that kept coming. Most people didn't realize that her daughter was dying and so the

cards came with happy greetings. Lois talked to her pastor about how she couldn't send Christmas cards that year and that really bothered her. The pastor said that he was sure that people would understand that she was very busy and that she just wasn't in the spirit to send cards. The woman explained to her pastor that the reason she wished she had the time to send cards was because it was that year that she really understood Christmas. She said that every time she had to feed her daughter, turn her, or give her a morphine shot that the only thing that gave her comfort was in knowing that God was with her. You see God's gift to you isn't just knowing that you now have the assurance that you will be with God forever in heaven because of the gift of Jesus. God's gift to you is in knowing that God is also with you right now no matter where you go in this world.

God's gift to you is truly a gift. It's difficult for us to understand that, isn't it? We often see gifts that are given to us as an obligation. We feel like we have to give something of equal value. I think there is also the feeling at times that we don't come out too well on gift exchanges. I remember when I was in grade school and we had a class gift exchange. I gave the person whose name I drew a cool race car. Do you know what I got? A pack of math flash cards. That was the worst gift I've

ever gotten. Sometimes, we end up like the man who was buying a small bottle of perfume for his wife at Christmas. The clerk asked him if it was a surprise. He said, "Well, she's expecting a trip to Hawaii so I guess it will be a surprise."

The shepherds who were there on that first Christmas received a gift that was truly a surprise. It was something that was beyond imagination. It was also something that they had not in any way deserved or earned. They couldn't pay for it. It was truly a gift. This gift is in a sense an exchange for us though. When Jesus went to the cross, He took your sins and gave you His righteousness in return. This was an exchange that was truly one sided.

The last thing we want to talk about is the most important thing about any gift and that is in knowing that the gift is for you. Why were the shepherds so excited about this gift? The angel told them that the child is born unto you. The angel told them that this gift was for them. I suppose they might have been excited if they had been told that the gift was for someone else, but not as excited.

I want to finish by looking at the mural that is directly above me. It's a familiar scene. It is a picture of our text here tonight. We see the angel proclaiming the good news to the shepherds. It seems pretty normal, but there are a couple of things about it that have always bothered me. The first time I

saw it I immediately noticed a couple of things out of place. For one thing, the angel is holding a palm branch. Why? The other thing that bothers me is that there is a dog there, which looks like a border collie, and the one shepherd's hat isn't right. At first, I thought that maybe it was just the artist trying to be all contemporary, but I don't think so. Things like that in Christian art usually have a reason.

I called the one person who I figured would have an answer: Jean Zeitler. She told me she had no idea, which told me that if she didn't know the answer has been lost to history. But Jean did give me some information that was helpful. She gave me the name of the artist and the year when he painted it. The hat that the one shepherd is wearing would have belonged to the era when the painting was done in the early nineteenth hundreds. You see the artist is trying to make the one shepherd look like a contemporary. He is trying to convey to you that you were there on that very first Christmas. He is trying to convey to you that this gift of a Savior is for you. You see you should be painted on that mural.

I hope that this will be a very memorable Christmas for you. But do you know what? No matter what gifts you get this year, you have already received God's gift to you. He gives you the same thing every Christmas. He gives you the gift of a Savior. He gives you the forgiveness of sins, life, and

salvation. He has given you the greatest gift that you could  
ever receive. Amen!!!