

*The Perfect Gift*  
Ephesians 4.7-10  
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December 24, 2003 — Christmas Eve  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury

Ephesians 4.7-10 (NRSV)

But each of us was given grace according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said,

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,  
he gave gifts to his people.”

(When it says, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.)

We'll come back to this text from Ephesians in a moment. But in thinking about the “perfect” gift I want to begin with a verse from the book of James: “Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” (James 1.17) Every perfect gift is from God. That's what James is saying.

So tonight I want us to think about the gifts. Think about the question of the omnipresent Santa Clauses in this season: “What do you want for Christmas?” Really now, what do you want? What is the perfect gift?

Of course, our gifts come in all shapes and sizes. They can be inexpensive or very costly. Receiving some, we respond with genuine appreciation and excitement. Others bring out a rather strained smile — an “Oh, how nice” kind of response — and an immediate impulse to lock it away in some closet. Some gifts are only good for returning for a refund.

In this light, ponder the gift of the Christ, the gift of God, the gift that touches us to our depths and transforms our lives as nothing else can.

Friends, the gift of Christ is that which measures the grace given to each of us. In other words, according to the riches of God in Christ each of us is granted grace. What is that grace? It is the power to live meaningfully in the world.

This world is a beautiful place. Every once in a while we can be simply stunned by the transcendent and shimmering glory of God's creation. We can be moved to tears by the wonders of human friendship and love. But in spite of these things we all know in our hearts that the world is also a darksome and troubled place. War, hatred, and fear routinely assault us from the headlines and newscasts.

There is, it seems, at life's core a flaw — a dark streak — that affects everything we are and everything we do. We can portray this with large brush strokes and speak of the tragedies of war and hunger and hatred between races and religions. Or we can paint with small, delicate but equally tragic strokes the little cruelties and haunting hurts that are present even in our own lives.

Tom Long, who teaches seminary students how to preach, tells of taking his two teenagers, David and Melanie, on a Christmas shopping trip to New York City. They parked the car on the Manhattan end of the tunnel, which meant they had to walk along 42nd Street on the way to Bloomingdale's. It seems that 42nd Street has become one of those streets where all of civilization's sleaziness and smut have concentrated. Tom says that not only is 42nd Street the symbol of the city at its worst, it is the city at its worst: the pimps and prostitutes openly peddle their wares; dope pushers operate with impunity; pornographic movies and stage shows suit every deviant taste. All the debauchery of the city lives in those few blocks just west of Broadway.

Tom said, "My kids were trying to look cool but my overriding thoughts were on them, in the middle of all this trash, Melanie and David, my treasure." Then he added, "For one brief moment, there entered into my mind the thought that each of these, too — the pimps and prostitutes, the dope peddlers and drug addicts — that each of these, too, is somebody's child, somebody's treasure."

That was a fleeting thought for Tom and it can be fleeting for us too. And painful. It's painful to admit that the 42nd Streets in life are not that far from us and the people there are not that different than we are. In any case, with eyes fixed straight ahead and a protective arm around each child, Tom shoved their way through the crowd that day on 42nd Street.

At the end of the block there was a street preacher, quoting scripture and shouting biblical admonitions through a battery-powered megaphone to the passing masses of people, who were paying him very little attention except for the occasional jeer.

Now Tom Long claims no theological affinity for this self-appointed prophet of the Lord. But he is a professor of preaching and he says, "The brother did catch my attention because he had a text. In his own disorganized, perhaps even demented way, he was trying to communicate to that disinterested crowd of New Yorkers the message that was burning in his heart — for it was Christmas time and his text was 'The Word is made flesh, and dwells among us, filled with grace and truth.'"<sup>1</sup>

In very truth, that's a text that any preacher seeks to be worthy of. For the Word made flesh is God's gift and without it there is no hope. Life's dark streak is seen on 42nd Street. It is seen in things both near and personal or distant and immense. And it produces in us a longing, a half whispered desire for deliverance to a place of freedom and peace and blessing. For the ancient Israelites that longing, steeped into them through the centuries, became the hope for a Messiah. It is the Christian message, the good news of Christmas, that the Messiah has come in Jesus Christ. In the gift of the Messiah, we have been given grace to live meaningfully in the midst of a tangled world.

Does this grace produce the blessing of a pillow that we might sleep blissfully and only dream of the darkness at the heart of life? No. Is this grace a nice warm feeling that insulates us from life's 42nd Streets or terrorists or our neighbor? No. It is, rather, a call to live in the presence of God no matter what. The gift of Christ is grace: a darkness shattering beacon of

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, "The Gift That Keeps on Giving," *Pulpit Resource* 29.4 (2001): 54.

light that says, "Follow. This is the way." The gift of Christ is not a present to be ignored, put back in the box, or returned to the store. It is the gift that really means something. It brushes away the cobwebs of fear that grip our souls and frees us to live. This is the perfect gift.

So how do we know it's all true. It's nice to believe that the gift of Christ is grace to live. But how can we be sure?

The answer is in the Ephesians text in all that talk about ascending and descending. What Paul was trying to say is that the Christ who reigns to give us gifts is not a cosmic Santa dispensing his goodies to those who have been nice and not naughty. Far from that, Christ is he who as God descended to take on our life in the birth of a baby. He was born. He lived life just like you and me. He felt our aches and pains. He encountered that dark flaw and the longings of our hearts. And he died.

But because God refuses to be defeated by darkness and death, he lives. And he knows who we are. He knows what it's like to walk in our shoes. He's still doing it in us. It would be easy to dismiss a God who stayed aloof and distant. It's hard to ignore a God who is one of us. This is, truly, the perfect gift.

What do you want for Christmas this year? I hope you will be satisfied with nothing less than the perfect gift of Christ. He knows what your life is like and gives you the grace to live it, now and forever.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, Father of the heavenly lights, in this season of gifts and giving, never let us be content with anything less than the gift of the Child Christ. By his grace, may we be empowered to live life fully, deeply, richly. O God, in this time of Christmas, there are so many who know not of this gift or who seem so beaten down that they cannot accept it. Turn our eyes and our feet toward them. Let us never hoard that which you have given us but freely give as we have freely received. Help us, we pray, to be the heralds of the good news of peace on earth, good will to all living things. We ask it in the name of he who was born and who reigns. Amen