

December 24, 2019 (Christmas Eve, 10 pm)

TEXT: [Luke 2:1–16](#)

TITLE: Gift Recipients

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

We are not reading Matthew's version of the Christmas story tonight. There will be no mention of magi and a star. No mention of gifts brought to the manger bed of the Christ child. Don't even think about it. The Christmas story in Luke's gospel has none of that gift-giving stuff and in some ways it's the stronger story because of this. Is this heresy to question all this on Christmas Eve? Well, I think you can argue that the gift-giving part of Christmas was never its main focus. Sure, gold, frankincense and myrrh are nice, but think of the Little Drummer Boy. What new mother in a maternity ward with a sleeping newborn wants to hear a drum solo? Or there's O. Henry's classic story of Christmas irony in which the maiden sells her long hair to buy her love a chain for his watch, only to have him sell his watch to buy her brushes for her beautiful hair. Gift-giving is tricky in the best of times, and it only becomes harder when it's done under pressure every December 25th.

I could lecture for hours unpacking the whole Christmas gift-giving tradition, but stay with me while I offer this short version. Three hundred years after the birth of Jesus, a kindly Turkish bishop named Nicholas became known for his generosity toward the poor and needy. This included legends about his tossing bags of gold coins through the window of a poor man's house so the man's daughters would have a dowry and could be married. St. Nicholas supposedly died on December 6, but he remained quite popular in the church clear up to the time of the Reformation, when our Protestant ancestors tossed out veneration of saints. Except Nicholas never lost his popularity in Holland, where the Dutch honored his death day, December 6th, by putting gifts in shoes left out the night before. Why shoes—or frankly, why stockings for that matter? Perhaps because they were left by the fireplace to dry overnight during the cold, wet, winter seasons.

Anyway, fast forward from the 1600s to the 1800s in New York State. For the longest time, Christmas Eve was a time of rowdy celebrations in which bands of young men would go from house to house, demanding drinks of wassail punch or foods like figgy pudding or coins from their wealthier neighbors. This type of begging by the poor from the gentry folk was all well and good in quaint British villages, but in urban New York with a growing working class population, this could have led to real trouble. So a group of wealthy men known as the Knickerbockers invented a series of traditions to move the Christmas activities from the streets into the homes. A generation before Dickens wrote his Christmas Carol, the American Washington Irving wrote his Sketch Book, which waxed poetic about lovely Christmas traditions for the home—games and elaborate dinners, followed by drinks around a roaring Yule log fire.

For further inspiration, where did these Knickerbockers turn? Why, to our good friends, the Dutch (given New York's venerable Dutch heritage) and to their patron saint, St. Nicholas. So first came Irving's essays on Christmas traditions, followed by Clement

Moore's poem, *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*. And before you know it, we've got St. Nick and bags of gift-wrapped toys, decorated trees, Amazon gift cards, free shipping for orders over \$75, and credit card bills that haunt us far longer than Jacob Marley ever imagined possible. Ho, ho, ho.

Luke's gospel has none of this. The main character in their drama is a group of shepherds watching their flocks by night. They learn of the birth of Christ from an angelic messenger and then rush to the manger to see the child with nary a gift in their hands. For Luke, gift-giving wasn't the point. Something else was the focus that night.

So take a breath and consider Luke's Christmas story. First, several times we are told that Bethlehem is the city of David. David was the famous king of an earlier millennium who just happened to be a shepherd. He had been called by God away from his flocks to lead the people, and despite his imperfections the Lord's favor was upon him. Second, Bethlehem is a small city not far from the capital city of Jerusalem, which contained the temple where God was worshiped. Worshipers who came to the temple either brought sacrificial animals from home, or they bought them once they arrived in the city. Shepherds tending flocks of sheep outside the city of Jerusalem were likely providing lambs and sheep intended for temple sacrifices. Third, thirty years after the first Christmas, Jesus Christ would end his life in Jerusalem, crucified, buried and resurrected there. One of the many titles his followers would use for him was the "lamb of God."

Suddenly a different tone emerges from this particular re-telling of the Christmas story. There is intentionality present behind the details of Jesus' birth story. When the Israel people were lost long before, God came to them and provided a king. Though imperfect and flawed, like all of us, God's mercy rested upon David and allowed him to succeed and bring glory to God. Centuries later, the people of the David's land struggled with violence, poverty and Roman oppression. Into their darkness came the Light of Life. A poor couple would bear a son, as innocent and meek as a baby lamb. And once more, shepherds would lead the way to learn of this good news of great joy for all people. They wouldn't bring any gifts to the manger, but there they would receive a gift. That's the focus of Luke's story.

Gift receiving, not gift-giving, is the heart of Christmas. That may sound trite, but it is a critical distinction to remember. Gift-receiving speaks of a connection between two people – the giver and the receiver, united by the gift held briefly by two sets of hands. The same threefold pattern is present in Christian love – in which there is the lover, the beloved, and the love that connects them. On that morning long ago, there was a newborn child given to the world out of love, a shepherd boy to lead a wandering and fearful people. That gift needed to recipients to become complete. The shepherds, outsiders, poor workers from the fields, were the first to receive this gift. They completed the circle—God the giver, Christ the gift, humanity the recipient. And every one of us has followed that same circular path as part of coming to accept our Christian faith.

To shift our focus from gift-giving to gift-receiving opens our eyes to how gracious and generous life can be. I brought up the frivolous example of the Pittsburgh Left earlier, but even there this pattern can be found. Two drivers have to acknowledge one another, and one driver has to accept another driver as having value and worth, wherever they're heading, and gift them the opportunity to go first through the intersection. When done well, it is a connection of grace, of community, of trust and love.

Isaiah, the prophet of old, put the Christmas emphasis right where it needs to be: *Unto us a child has been born; to us a son has been given. And he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* Be gift recipients this night. Remember the eternal and gracious gift-giver—and the loving, redeeming gift—and rejoice! That's precisely the reason why Luke tells us his Christmas story.