

“The Gift that Keeps on Giving.”

What’s fascinating to me about today’s gospel reading, is just how very differently John’s gospel introduces the life and ministry of Jesus, as compared to that of, say, the more-familiar story in Luke’s gospel.

And, make no mistake, Luke’s version is so much more familiar, and not only because we hear it recited each and every Christmas, but also because that particular story has been woven into the very fabric of our culture.

However, that being said, time and familiarity have tamed what was originally a scandalous story.

In that story, a young woman is visited by an angel and told that she— although still a virgin— is going to conceive and give birth to none other than the son of God.

And then, we hear about a visit that this young woman pays on her elderly cousin who, despite her advancing years, is also miraculously pregnant.

And then, we’re told how this young woman’s fiancé discovers that she is pregnant, and considers dissolving the engagement until a divine encounter in his dreams persuades him to go ahead with the marriage plans.

We hear about the long, arduous journey that this couple takes and, when they arrive at their destination, how a shortage of accommodations force them to settle for a stable amid oxen and cattle, where the young woman eventually gives birth.

And then we hear about some shepherds, way off in the field, who are told of the birth of this boy by way of angelic visitors, and who then rush to see this miraculous child.

And finally, we hear about three mysterious visitors from the East— kings by some accounts, wise men by others— who travel a great distance, following a special star, to see the child, and lavish him with expensive gifts.

Now, even though I left out their names, I could probably repeat what I just said to just about anyone, and they'd be able to correctly identify what this story is talking about. In fact, I could have given each character entirely different names altogether, and you still would have been able to recognize it.

However, and by way of comparison, what Luke's gospel spent several chapters laying down, John's gospel spends maybe only half of one chapter; and that's what we heard this morning. And I'm sure you noticed that John's gospel gives no place to the stories that we are so fond of. Instead, John departs from romance and sentiment and instead gives us a mystery: the preexistent *Logos*, the Word, the Son of God, who was present at the moment of creation, and who comes to Earth as a human.

There are no "warm fuzzies" in John's telling of how Jesus came into this world. What John stressed is the fact that this Jesus, this Son of God, was not recognized by the people whom he created, and was, in fact, rejected by those who should have known better.

Nevertheless, despite the differences in how they tell their stories, the goal of each author is the same: to leave no doubt in anyone's mind who this Jesus of Nazareth is.

And in their own ways, each makes it clear that the reason for Jesus' birth is this and this alone:

so that he could live a sinless life;

so that he could teach us by his example;

so that he could die on the cross on our behalf; and

so that all of humanity could finally be reconciled to God.

It's really that simple. In other words, in a deliberate act of will, God came to Earth in the form of man, *in order to be reconciled to all people*.

And if that divine gesture of self-giving will not to be in vain, if we too are willing to live, at least a part of our lives, for the sake of others, and for the sake of reconciliation. Therefore, allow me to suggest that we undertake to do two things in the coming year, to enable all this to come about.

The first suggestion is this: That we seek to be reconciled with any person with whom we have a strained, unhappy, or even a broken relationship.

During the course of this past year, we've probably had many experiences with many kinds of people— family members, co-workers, neighbors. And, in the course of these experiences, there may have been times when some of those relationships were thrown out of joint, and a desert of animosities developed between us and someone else. Perhaps, at the time, we would have liked to have mended those relationships, but maybe we were so busy with our own responsibilities, and perhaps so full of anger ourselves, that there was no time to give to the business of reconciliation.

Therefore, I suggest that we might think about such a person with whom we are at odds, and find a way by which we can restore that lost friendship, so that our Christmas gift to ourselves and that other person will be peace.

The second suggestion is this: Using our imagination, think of someone that we might surprise with a gift of grace.

However, this should be someone to whom we have no obligation. And it should be someone whose need is not so great, so that if we did not respond to it we would not feel guilty.

Find that special person upon whom we might confer a private blessing. It may be that we just pick up the telephone and call someone whose life is not tied to ours in any way, but someone about whom we know something, and with this knowledge as a background, we say a word of reassurance, of comfort, of delight, of satisfaction. Having done so, we can know that out of the fullness of our own hearts, we have conferred upon some unsuspecting person a gentle grace that will help make this season for them a good and happy time.

I believe that we capture something of the meaning of the life and ministry of Jesus *in the gifts we give to one another*. But the thing is, we usually give gifts

only to those who love us, or to those who know us. The story of Jesus is a story of how God knowingly and deliberately gave of himself— completely, and without holding back anything— to people who rejected him, and who eventually killed him.

And Christmas is where it all started! And the gift of himself was God's Christmas gift to you and me. And the gift of self is not only the best gift we could ever hope to receive, but it's also the best gift we could ever hope to give.

Amen.