

Isaiah 7:10-14; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Matthew 1:18-25; & Romans 1:1-7  
Fourth Sunday Morning of Advent, December 19, 2004

Jolly Old St. Nicholas, lean your ear this way,  
Don't you tell a single soul, what I'm going to say.  
Christmas Eve is coming soon, now you dear old man;  
Whisper what you'll bring to me, tell me if you can.

In case you didn't know, Christmas Eve will be here this Friday. Every year I find myself saying that, once again, Christmas has sneaked up on me. I don't know why I do that. After 48 years of breathing and heartbeats, and especially after 28 years of pastoring, you'd think that I would have figured out by now that Christmas Eve occurs every December 24 and Christmas Day every December 25. It happens that way every year. I've tried to remember, but for the life of me I can't remember a single year in my lifetime when it hasn't happen that way. So I'm not sure why I say it "sneaked up on me."

"Christmas Eve is coming soon." I always look forward to it. Christmas Eve is shrouded in awe and mystery. There is simply something unique about that most hallowed day. Allow me to ask you a question. "What's your perfect Christmas Eve?" I'll share mine. I like for Christmas Eve to have a chill in the air. The sky needs to be overcast as if the heavens were about to unload heaps of snow. No rain, please, on Christmas Eve. Now I love sunshine, but on Christmas Eve, I want the sun to stay hidden until late afternoon. Then I want the star of our Solar System to slowly break out from behind those clouds and brighten the atmosphere. The sky is supposed to be clear by the time worshippers arrive at the Church House for Christmas Eve Worship. I'm usually one of the last to depart after our worship and when I do, I like to exit the building into a cold night, with a clear sky, stars brightly shining, and hopefully, a moon that is full. According to the Weather Channel earlier this morning, I just might get my perfect Christmas Eve.

At our home on Allison Circle, the four of us will have Christmas Eve candlelight dinner consisting of delicacies that go way back in our family – Bar-BQ on rye bread, cheese ball, wheat crackers, raw vegetables and dip, sparkling beverage, the non-alcoholic kind, mind you, and whatever sweets this gracious congregation has provided for us and believe me, you do provide. While eating we listen to a Lorie Line CD, "Home for the Holidays." Weird combination of food and music? I suppose. Don't knock it, though. I know some people who are rather cultured folk right here in Carrollton who can't wait for Christmas Eve Worship to be over so they can get a choice seat at The Waffle House and play the jukebox, especially the Elvis Christmas songs! After we clean the kitchen, everybody goes his or her own way. Surely by now you know that I watch my favorite movie, "It's A Wonderful Life," and after it is over I watch Christmas Eve Worship services from across the nation, even catch a mid-night Mass, and usually get in bed around 1:00 am. All of that is a part of the awe, the mystery, the tradition of Christmas Eve.

At the Gentry house all the presents are under the tree by Christmas Eve night. It's a gradual process. My mind is captured by wonder: "I *wonder* what's in those boxes, the ones with my name on them?" This year is going to be a bit different. Each of us has Christmas lists. "All I want for Christmas" consist of this and that, and that and this. Well, this year I didn't submit a list. I simply told Jackie, "Whatever. I really don't have a list this year." And I don't. I usually get an assortment of shirts and socks and pants, maybe a suit or two and a sport coat. Our dog, Kiwi, as a rule, gives me a tie. Last year I got a couple of CDs: the "Best of Motown: The Classic Years" and the "American Dreams Original Sound Track, 1963-1964." That's some mighty fine music, don't you think? Those were things I had requested. But this year? Whatever. I really don't know what I'll get since I didn't present a list. I think it's put the family in Kentucky on edge. It doesn't take a lot for me to do that, by the way. So all I want for Christmas this year is whatever I get. Maybe somebody, be it Jolly Old St. Nicholas or whomever, needs to whisper in my ear what the family will bring to me. "Tell me if you can!"

What do you want for Christmas this year? Did you make your list? How expensive are the items on your list? Christmas is expensive. If you've seen the movie, "Christmas With the Kranks," or

better, read John Grisham's novel, which is the basis of the movie, Skipping Christmas, you'll know that the Krank family spent \$6,000.00 on the previous Christmas. No wonder they thought about skipping it.

Don't believe Christmas is expensive? Think about this. According to the Pittsburgh based PNC Financial Services Group, Inc. if you were to buy all the gifts mentioned in the song, "The Twelve Days of Christmas," you would spend a hefty piece of change. You remember "The Twelve Days of Christmas" and all those items. Each day there is something different. Start with Day Twelve and work back.

On the twelfth day of Christmas,  
My true love gave to me...  
Twelve drummers drumming,  
Eleven pipers piping,  
Tens lords a-leaping,  
Nine ladies dancing,  
Eight maids a-milking,  
Seven swans a-swimming,  
Six geese a-laying,  
Five gold rings!  
Four calling birds,  
Three French hens,  
Two turtledoves,  
And a partridge in a pear tree.

Now if you were to buy all those gifts repeatedly on each day, as the song suggests, you'd spend \$66,334.00. That's up a thousand dollars from last year. Buying each item just once would cost \$17,279.00.<sup>1</sup> So Christmas is expensive. And all I want for Christmas is... You fill in the blank.

When you think about it, Christmas has always been expensive. Even the first Christmas was expensive. That is when God attempted to deliver the greatest Gift ever: the Gift of His Son who would become the Savior of the world since His destiny was to save His people from their sins. Reminiscent of Isaiah's prophesy to the troubled Judean King of the latter half of the eighth century BC, Ahaz,, this Child would be "*Immanuel*" (v. 14b) – "God is with us." That is the word Archie read from Isaiah 7:14.

"God is with us." And God succeeded in making that delivery, being with and in the midst of humanity. He delivered that gift through a blessed young teenaged Virgin, Mary, and a faithfully obedient foster father, Joseph. Angels appeared in dreams. They sang at the birth of Jesus according to Luke 2. Shepherds came in from the fields to witness what had happened. Family members held a newborn Baby. Mary and Joseph were enthralled. Eventually a group of astrologers from Iraq arrived. God delivered alright. And what a delivery it was.

Have you ever considered what Mary and Joseph might have wanted for Christmas? What do any parents want on the eve of the birth of their child? A healthy baby of course. All the hope and peace and joy and love that a child can bring. Joseph and Mary got that and much more. They also wanted to be faithful and obedient to their God who had delivered them and their ancestors. They wanted restoration in their lives and the lives of their kinsfolk and all humanity. They desired that a light would shine in their own darkness as well as the world's darkness. These desires centered on their relationship to their God. The text in Matthew 1 says that Joseph was a "*righteous*"(v. 19) man. For some reason I'm led to believe that Mary was a *righteous* woman.

All that "righteous" stuff in this text causes me to contemplate that when Jesus was born that there was a brightness that filled Mary's and Joseph's hearts – especially when the shepherds arrived. Could it be they remembered some of those Psalms using shepherd imagery? Could it be that the words Charles read from Psalm 80 to summons us to worship welled up in the minds: "*Let your face shine, that we may be saved*" (vv. 3b, 7b, & 19b). The angel told Joseph in a dream that Jesus would save His people from their sins. They found that salvation delivered in Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph – all of them

for the fact of the matter – saw that salvation in the shining face of a Baby named Jesus – **“God is with us” (Matthew 1:23b).**

So here we are in AD 2004, which is a long way removed from BC 4. And yet, I find myself wanting what Mary and Joseph wanted. All I want for Christmas is the shining Presence of God in a Child who is capable of saving us – saving us from sin and disgrace; saving us from the literal expense of, not only Christmas, but also life itself; and saving us from, dare I say, ourselves. Of course. This is all I want. The shining Presence of God in a Child who is Immanuel – always with us, no matter what. Always with us in the good and the not so good. Always with us in joy and sorrow. Always with us in sickness and health. Always with us in wealth and poverty. Always with us in life and death.

All I want for Christmas is a reminder. A reminder that I’m called to a higher level of devotion. Joseph certainly was called and he moved to a higher level. Did you hear what Amy said in the text she read from Matthew 1? Joseph **“did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him...” (v. 24).** Christmas challenges us to heed God’s command everyday and in our devotion to His command, we realize that life really is fantastic no matter what I eat or do on Christmas Eve night, even if I don’t get the perfect Christmas Eve, or if what’s in those packages that bear my name is a bust. It doesn’t matter for yonder is a Savior who leans His ear, in the spirit of Jolly Old St. Nicholas, our way. He leans His very life our way, to give us what we really need: Himself and the eternity He offers to all who will believe as His Presence shines on all so all may have the opportunity to be saved. Now that can’t be found under the tree. It can, however, be found on a tree. The tree of Calvary. A tree that was made into a Cross.

It was there where an Adult Jesus died so people could experience salvation. All I want for Christmas is to start at the manger that will set me on a journey to the cross where He died for you and me and then go on a little farther and find a grave that is empty. This Baby, the Lord Jesus Christ, who grew to be an adult and died at age 33 or so, was, according to Romans 1, **“declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead...” (v. 4).** All I want for Christmas is to believe that again and again and again. Conception. Birth. Life. Death. Life again. That’s eternity. And really, when all is said and done, eternity is all I want for Christmas because eternity is enough.

I shared this story in a sermon that I preached three years ago on the Fourth Sunday of Advent. I recently shared it at the Almon Funeral Home Grief Service three weeks ago. I try not to wear stories out, but this one is worth sharing, again, for it puts in perspective what we really ought to want for Christmas.

There was a family of four people – a mother, a father, a daughter, and a son – who lived in a small town. It became a family of three because the son died. This family had a difficult time processing the grief. The father of that family was postmaster at the local post office. The day before Christmas Eve he was going through some of the mail that had come in and there were several letters addressed to Santa Claus. He noticed one letter in particular that caught his attention. The handwriting was strangely familiar. It was his daughter’s. Sure enough it bore their return address. Realizing she had already written Santa, his curiosity got the best of him and he opened it. And this is what he read. “Dear Santa: Things have not been well at our house since my little brother died this past July. We are all so unhappy. When I try to talk to Daddy about it, the only thing he can say is that ‘only eternity will change it.’ Santa, I don’t know what eternity is, but if you have any extra eternities, would you please leave one at our house on Christmas Eve?”

The father realized what had happened. He learned something from his daughter. He went home that day a different person, realizing that even in the death of his son, he had received the greatest Gift of all – a Gift that would shine in his darkness and restore him because the Gift, Jesus the Christ, had come to save him from sin which results in death. When this father got home that day, his little girl noticed that her daddy had received his present of eternity the day before Christmas Eve.

Christmas opens the door to eternity and there is plenty of eternity to go around. That’s all anyone needs this Christmas. Eternity. And remember, there is plenty of eternity to go around. All I want for Christmas. I know what I want? What about you? What do you want for Christmas?

**Pastoral Blessing**

Depart, now, into this Advent day with an awareness that Christmas is almost here. And as you go in the fellowship of God, your Heavenly Father, who is with you always, remember, that His Presence will:

Fill you with the Light of Life;  
Overwhelm you with hope, peace, joy, & love;  
Sustain you when you are weary;  
Convict you when you sin;  
Forgive you when you ask; and  
Pick you up when you fall down.

Go forth into the world with great Joy and Love and return to this Holy Place with exceedingly great Joy and Love on Christmas Eve to celebrate Emmanuel's birth – even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen and Amen.

**Sermon and Pastoral Blessing by Dr. Jimmy Gentry, Pastor  
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**All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are from The New Revised Standard Version, 1989.**

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<sup>1</sup> An article from The Associated Press, ““Twelve Days of Christmas’ Gifts Up More Than \$1,000.00 This Year,” published in The Times-Georgian (Carrollton, GA: Paxton Media, Tuesday, November 30, 2004), p. 7A.