

THE CHRISTMAS GIFT

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The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. (Isaiah 9:2, 6)

Let's begin today with a story about the giving and receiving of gifts. It's a story that purports to be true, even though I've heard several versions of it. Nevertheless, the gist usually goes something like this: A young man had worked hard in college and was about to graduate at the top of his class. His father was a wealthy business tycoon who let it be known that he wanted to reward his son upon graduation. What the son wanted and needed more than anything was a new car to get him started. His father could certainly afford it, so the son began dropping hints about a particular make and model that would be just right.

Following the graduation ceremony, the older man called his son into his library at home, and presented him with a beautifully wrapped gift box. The young man opened the box, and discovered inside a fine leather-bound Bible. He was devastated. This was no car. This was no great gift given his father's resources. "A Bible?" he shouted. "A Bible is all you can bring yourself to give me?" With that he slammed the partially opened gift on the desk and stormed out of the house, vowing never again to ask his father for anything.

Just a few days later the young man received an urgent message from his mother. His father had suffered a massive heart attack and did not survive. Would he come? Of course he did, and during a quiet moment he came upon the Bible, still in its box, still on his father's desk. This time he opened it, and found inside a note from his father saying how proud he was to have such a fine son, and how much he loved him, even though he didn't always say so in person. Attached to the note was an ignition key for the car he'd wanted, with a receipt from the local dealer. On the receipt his father had written the words *Paid in full*.

Christmas is the story of giving and receiving God's great gift to humanity. *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.* Of course, our minds turn towards Christmas at the sound of these familiar words. But the truth is, they date from a time over seven centuries before the birth of Jesus. To understand them fully we must encounter a man who has never appeared in any Christmas pageant or nativity scene. The man's name was Ahaz, and he was the king of Judah and heir of David. He was the latest in the long line to rule in the Davidic Dynasty, which itself was a sign of God's presence with the people. The understanding was that as long as an heir of David reigned, God would be in the midst of the people.

The years of Ahaz were a challenge. It was time of tremendous anxiety and fear, when God's presence was hard to see. Three stronger and hostile kings threatened to move against tiny Judah. Two of them had already taken up siege positions around Jerusalem, and the biggest of them all, Assyria, loomed in the background. In the seventh chapter of Isaiah the prophet describes how the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook with fear as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. Imagine yourself standing on the walls of Jerusalem. You are Ahaz, and everywhere you look you see a menacing power amassed at your borders. You are the people who walk in darkness. You are the people who dwell in the shadow of death.

Just about this time, just as Ahaz was checking the water supply to see if Jerusalem could withstand the siege, God sent the prophet Isaiah to give the king a gift. Isaiah told Ahaz not to fear.

Judah would not perish at the hands of her enemies. God's gift was an invitation to trust. Fear not. God is with you. Ahaz found Isaiah's words impossible to believe, so the prophet gave him a sign that would be a tangible token of God's presence. Isaiah pointed to a young woman standing nearby and said, "*Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*" By the time the child is about two years old, this crisis before you will be forgotten.

Who was the young, pregnant woman? Some say she could have been anyone. Others speculate that she was Isaiah's wife. Still others claim she must have been Ahaz's wife. What makes the most sense to me is the latter possibility. The woman was the wife of Ahaz, the king. The child she carried would be named Immanuel – God with us. The sign of God's presence was the Davidic Dynasty. Only a child of Ahaz could continue the line and embody the promise. What is more, Isaiah went on in chapter nine to announce just such a royal birth, *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.* But is the Immanuel child in chapter seven the same as the Royal child in chapter nine of Isaiah? The question is quite likely to come up at your Christmas dinner and generate sparks, especially after that certain uncle of yours has had a few glasses of wine. So let me put the matter to rest for you. You can tell your skeptical friends that you heard it at Grace Church, and if you hear it at Grace Church, it's so! Yes, they are one and the same. The Immanuel child and the Royal child are one and the same. What does it mean? It means that God follows through with his promises. Isaiah's words contained the key. They were a gift from God: the gift of hope and promise for Ahaz. If you focus on the child, Ahaz – on your child – and not on the problems surrounding you, you will endure. The child is a sign that God is with you from this time forth, even forever. Immanuel.

How do you think Ahaz responded to God's gift? Sadly, not well. Ahaz didn't understand it. This was no help. This was no great gift given all God's resources. These were just words. Of what possible relevance could they be? So rather than trusting God's sign of Immanuel, Ahaz panicked and sold himself and his people into the service of the biggest bully on the block – the Assyrian king.

Seven centuries later God was preparing to give the gift again, but this time some people were willing to receive it. The Assyrians had departed the world stage long ago. Now it was the Roman occupation that cast its dark shadow across the land. You know Mary, barely a teenager when the angel Gabriel visited her with the news that she would conceive and bear a son named Jesus. It was hardly the perfect gift for an unmarried Jewish peasant girl, but Mary said, Yes, *behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word (Luke 1:38).* You know Joseph, Mary's espoused husband. When he learned of Mary's unusual pregnancy, he no more understood nor trusted her story than Ahaz did Isaiah's words. Joseph contemplated calling off the marriage. But unlike Ahaz he decided not to fear, and to receive the child as a gift from God. You know the shepherds. We've heard how the angels said to them: *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11).* Immanuel. God is with us. Here was the same invitation to trust and not to fear. Unlike Ahaz of long ago, they received the gift. They came in haste to see the child, and went away glorifying God.

Let's now turn the clock forward again – this time two-thousand years until we reach today. Today, God's gift of Immanuel is on offer to us. "God with us" can be our known reality as it was in ancient times. Yes, Christmas comes once more, but we needn't think that it's only this one day when God comes to us. By the power of the Spirit, God is available and accessible to us each and every day. But the past two years have been a challenge. We too live in a time of tremendous anxiety and fear, when God's presence is hard to see. The dark scourge casting a shadow across the land today is neither the Assyrians nor the Romans, but obviously Covid-19.

Here we are in the midst of our second pandemic Christmas, and the way the virus is trending it's a miracle we're able to gather at all. Bless you for enduring the long lines at pop-up testing sites throughout the city and vaccine requirements in the narthex of Grace Church. Add bag checks to the

mix and it all suggests that the inn at Bethlehem on the first Christmas was a pleasant experience by comparison. Tempers are wearing pretty thin out there. Have you noticed? It's not going too far to say that we have become the people who walk in darkness. All the world dwells in the land of the shadow of death. God's gift of Immanuel strikes many as a nice thought, but these are just words. I think on some level all of us want to experience transcendence, even the presence of God. But in toxic times such as these we have all we can do just to survive. So no thanks to any insubstantial promises of God's presence. No thanks, even, to this disease-ridden, violent world.

Yet, it's been into just such a world that God chooses to enter again and again. Whether it's on the walls of Jerusalem in a crisis, or at a crowded inn during a Roman census, or in your life and mine, God seeks to make his presence known not with empty words, but through the rough and tumble events unfolding around us. Of course, we can say no thank you. People said no thank you to Jesus all the time. Jesus would know rejection. St. John records that he *came into his own, but his own received him not (1:11)*. But he went on to write *that as many as received him, to them he gave power to become children of God (1:12)*. What does it take to see God's presence, and receive power to become children of God, even in the times that try our souls? The challenge for you and me is always to look deeper beneath the unpromising surface to find the sacred hidden within the mundane, sometimes fearful aspects of life.

Did you happen to see the article in *The New York Times* earlier this week about the college music professor in Tennessee?¹ Kenyon Wilson wanted to see if any of his students actually read the syllabus for his music seminar. So at the beginning of the semester he placed a fifty-dollar bill in a locker in the fine arts center, closed the door, and set the dial at zero. Then amidst some particularly dry text on page two of his three-page syllabus, he embedded the following sentences: "Free to the first who claims; locker one-hundred forty-seven; combination fifteen, twenty-five, thirty-five." Professor Wilson walked by the locker frequently and noted that the dial never moved off zero. Earlier this month, at the end of the semester, he retrieved the unclaimed fifty-dollar bill. Apparently, not one of the seventy students in his music seminar pressed on through the unpromising sentences of the syllabus. They were just words, after all. Of what possible relevance could they be to distracted students?

I am intrigued by the parallels with the Christmas story. Some awkward sentences appeared in the dry text of a syllabus, but no one looked deeply enough to realize they contained the key – the key to a surprising treasure. Some elegant sentences from the mouth of the prophet Isaiah met with equal disregard when they reached the ears of the harassed and harried King Ahaz. Little did he know that they contained the key – the key to saving his soul. When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, the vast majority of the world took no notice of him whatsoever. But others looked beneath the unpromising surface of an untimely birth in a toxic time. They heard and gave heed to the message of the angels, and perceived that this child was the key – the Key of David, who would open wide our heavenly home. The Immanuel child was the Royal child. God never breaks a promise.

So there you have some stories about the giving and receiving of gifts. Say yes to this life that God has entered, even in all of its awful splendor. Say yes to the child who is our gift today and always. Say yes to the wondrous gift so silently given. It is the light that shines in the darkness. The darkness shall neither comprehend it nor overcome it. Say yes, and you shall receive power to become a child of God.

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¹ "Buried in Syllabus, Prize Remains Unfound," by Isabella Grullon Paz. *The New York Times*, December 20, 2021.