**The Greatest Gift**

**by Kristi Meyer**

**WELS C20 – Advent by Candlelight 2020**

**Welcome, Introduction, and Opening Prayer**

Christmas is coming! This time of year we are reminded of that fact everywhere we turn. Christmas music is on the radio (24/7 on some stations!), our calendars are filling up with Christmas concerts and parties, and Christmas decorations and lights are popping up all around our neighborhoods. Perhaps the clearest indicator that Christmas is coming are the commercials and sale flyers with which we are constantly bombarded. Christmas advertising is in full swing, and the number of shopping days until Christmas is a nagging thought in the back of our minds.

Even though there are so many different ways to shop for Christmas presents, finding just the right gift for someone can be an incredibly stressful experience. And this experience becomes all the more stressful when you are trying to find a gift for *that* person. You know who I mean: the person who always gives you the perfect gift—thoughtfully chosen and beautifully wrapped, a gift that makes you tear up when you open it. As much as you contemplate the gift you will give to that person, it never *quite* rises to the level of the gift you receive. The gift that you put *so* much time and energy into giving pales in comparison to the perfect gift that you receive.

Would you believe that the same thing happened to Jesus during his life on earth? Time after time, his sinful creatures gave him imperfect gifts. Some people brought gifts in the midst of less-than-ideal circumstances. Some brought well-intentioned gifts that came with unexpected consequences. Some brought gifts that no one should ever receive. And *some* didn’t bring any gifts at all.

In spite of receiving all of these flawed gifts that weren’t fit for the Son of God, Jesus always gave the perfect gift in return. From his birth in Bethlehem to his death on Calvary, from his resurrection on Easter Sunday to his ascension 40 days later, Jesus knew exactly what to give a fallen world.

Today’s program is all about gifts, and it might be tempting to focus on what gift *you* would have given to Jesus if presented with the opportunity. Instead, I encourage you to focus on what each group of people *received*. Although time and space separate us from these people, we too are blessed to have Jesus give us the same gifts. We are given a message of prophecy fulfilled, of God coming to earth for all people, of sins forgiven and victory won, and of the sure and certain hope of worshiping our perfect gift-giver forever in heaven. *That* is the greatest gift that we could ever receive. Let’s open with prayer.

**Opening Prayer**

Dearest Lord, be with us today as we hear of imperfect gifts given and perfect gifts received. Remind us of the greatest gift ever given: your Son becoming man and living among us to save a world lost in sin. Show us that this gift is much more than just the baby in the manger that the world sees at Christmas and help us to share this perfect gift with a broken and hurting world around us. Amen.

**OR**

**Opening Prayer Litany**

**L:** Dearest Lord, be with us today as we hear of imperfect gifts given and perfect gifts received.

**C: We thank you, heavenly Father, for giving us every good and perfect gift.**

**L:** Remind us of the greatest gift ever given: your Son becoming man and living among us.

**C: We thank you, heavenly Father, for sending your Son to save a world lost in sin.**

**L:** Show us that this gift is much more than just the baby in the manger that the world sees at Christmas.

**C: We thank you, heavenly Father, for reminding us that this gift is more precious than all the gifts unwrapped and opened on Christmas morning.**

**L:** Help us to share this perfect gift with a broken and hurting world around us.

**C: Thanks be to you for your indescribable gift! Amen.**

**Opening hymn**

*Simple Joy: https://www.alfred.com/simple-joy-simple-gifts-joy-to-the-world/p/00-23068/*

*Come, O Precious Ransom, Come: Christian Worship 8*

*Hark the Glad Sound! The Savior Comes: Christian Worship 12*

**Scene 1: Gifts from Mary and Joseph**

Sometimes people think that because parents have nine months to prepare for the birth of their child, they should be ready with all sorts of wonderful gifts. In the months leading up to the birth of a baby, the parents *should* be eagerly anticipating his coming and planning for his birth. When labor begins, they *should* be in a familiar and comforting environment conducive to bringing a new life into the world. After the baby is born, he *should* be joyfully welcomed and placed in his loving mother’s arms. He *should* be dressed in clothes especially chosen for this occasion, and the growing family *should* enjoy some bonding time before they welcome neighbors and friends to meet their new addition.

None of this *was* the case with the birth of Jesus, though. Instead of eagerly making preparations for his arrival, Mary and Joseph were caught in a scandal involving an unwed mother and the possibility of a quiet divorce. Labor began not in the homey comforts of Nazareth, but in a cave, stable, or some other spare living space many miles away in Bethlehem. After his birth, Mary welcomed Jesus joyfully, but then laid him in a manger because there was no other suitable place. His first outfit was strips of cloth, and the distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem prevented neighbors and friends from visiting.

*God*, however, had been preparing for this event far longer than nine months. In the very first moments after sin marred his perfect creation, God promised the greatest gift: the One who would crush the serpent’s head, the One who would make payment for not only Adam and Eve’s sin but also for the sin of all people of all time. Throughout the pages of the Old Testament, God repeated and reaffirmed his promise to send his Son to bring mankind back into a right relationship with their Creator. The words of the prophets pointed ahead to this very night in Bethlehem: the night when heaven and earth intersected in a most extraordinary way, the night when Jesus—fully God but also fully man—was born of a virgin.

Mary and Joseph didn’t deserve to welcome the Savior into their family. There was nothing inherently special about them, nothing that made them worthy of being the mother and earthly father of Jesus. They were an ordinary Jewish couple from Nazareth, lowly descendants far removed from their great ancestor King David, a carpenter and his betrothed. In spite of all this, God chose Mary and Joseph to play a part in his plan of salvation. He chose them to be the first to welcome his Son into the world, the first to see the fulfillment of what had been prophesied so long ago. He gave them the greatest gift: a God who became man and dwelt among us.

*While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Luke 2:6,7).*

**Musical Selection**

*An Invitation for Advent: https://www.jwpepper.com/An-Invitation-for-Advent/10506058.item#/*

*How Many Kings: https://www.jwpepper.com/How-Many-Kings/10594911.item#/submit*

*The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came: Christian Worship 24*

**Scene 2: Gifts from the shepherds**

Baby books designate a page for parents to fill in the names of “baby’s first visitors.” These memorable first visitors—often family or very close friends—come to welcome the new baby and offer help and support to the parents. Even if they have already attended a baby shower, these first visitors will usually bring a gift for the new baby: something practical like a new onesie or blanket, or something impractical but *fun* like a tiny pair of shoes or a rattle the baby won’t be able to hold for several months. Gifts are often brought for the parents as well: a home-cooked meal, time spent holding the baby to allow for a much-needed parental nap, or the promise of babysitting in the future.

Luke tells us that Jesus’ first visitors were not the type of people most of us would want as our baby’s first visitors. They weren’t family or close friends—in fact, Mary and Joseph had never met them before. They were shepherds who lived in the fields on the outskirts of society. They were smelly. And dirty. AND it is almost *certain* that the babies they were used to dealing with were wooly and four-legged. Since Luke tells us they hurried off to see Mary and Joseph, they likely came empty-handed as well. No new clothes, no home-cooked meal—just a bunch of strange men descending on this new family.

From God’s perspective, however, the shepherds were definitely *not* empty-handed. The words of the prophets throughout Old Testament history were repeated by the angels on that first Christmas night. The ancient prophecies were *finally* fulfilled in the town of Bethlehem. And on the hillside outside the city, the shepherds caught a glimpse of heaven on earth, an angelic announcement, a proclamation that the Messiah had come. After the shepherds visited the manger, they took the gift they had been given and shared it with anyone who would listen. Their hands were empty, but their hearts were filled to overflowing.

The shepherds didn’t deserve to be the first to hear the good news of Jesus’ birth. There was nothing inherently special about them, nothing that made them worthy of being evangelists and spreading the message of the Savior coming to earth. They were men looked down upon because of their occupation whose lives revolved around their sheep. In spite of all this, God chose the shepherds to play a part in his plan of salvation. He chose them to receive the message of the angels and share this message with a world desperately in need of it. He gave them the greatest gift: the news of the Messiah who came to restore peace between God and man.

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them (Luke 2:16-18).*

**Musical Selection**

*All on a Silent Night: https://www.jwpepper.com/All-on-a-Silent-Night/10307377.item#/*

*One Small Child: https://www.handbellworld.com/music/MusicPiece.cfm?Piece=11966*

*Where Shepherds Lately Knelt: Christian Worship 54*

*Peace Came to Earth: Christian Worship Supplement 707*

**Scene 3: Gifts from the Wise Men**

It is always fun when someone who lives in a foreign country comes to visit. Hearing about different customs and aspects of daily life is usually eye-opening and often prompts humorous stories. Travel from a foreign country—especially travel involving several different modes of transportation—is sometimes delayed, making the eventual arrival all the more welcome. And the gifts! Delectable foods and sweets, toys and games begging to be played with, mementos from the land near and dear to the visitor’s heart. Although these items are unfamiliar, they are no less appreciated than gifts bought at the store down the street.

Mary and Joseph also welcomed foreign visitors. Unlike the shepherds, the Magi did not come empty-handed. They brought gifts of great value—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—but their travels were fraught with complications. The star they saw in the east told them of the birth of the king of the Jews but not of his exact location. Their stop in Jerusalem to inquire about his whereabouts aroused the suspicion, anger, and jealousy of King Herod. Rather than forgetting about this King of the Jews when the Magi did not return, King Herod acted on his jealously and murdered the young boys in Bethlehem. Indirectly, the Magi also brought Mary and Joseph the “gift” of an escape to Egypt and the inability to return to Bethlehem even after Herod’s death.

The Magi’s gifts were a mixed bag; the gifts they received were anything but. The message of the prophets had clearly been proclaimed for centuries: God chose the Israelites as his special possession and promised to bring the blessing of the Messiah through Abraham’s seed. The Magi were as far removed from God’s chosen people as one could get. Yet they saw the star, traveled to Bethlehem, and worshiped the King of the Jews. We celebrate the coming of the Magi on Epiphany, a holiday often called the Gentile Christmas. Even in the very early years of his life, we see clearly that Jesus is the Savior of the *whole* world—a teaching that Jesus himself continued to demonstrate throughout his life.

The Magi didn’t deserve to come and worship Jesus. There was nothing inherently special about them, nothing that made them worthy of the appearance of a star. They were residents of a far-away land, people outside of the children of Israel, foreign astrologers who knew the skies but likely had only a basic knowledge of the Old Testament. In spite of all this, God chose the Magi to play a part in his plan of salvation. He chose them to worship the Savior and witness to the fact that this Savior had come to save both Jews and Gentiles. He gave them the greatest gift: the promise that people from every nation and tribe and language and tongue are members of God’s family.

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him” (Matthew 2:1,2).*

**Musical Selection**

*The Kings: https://www.jwpepper.com/The-Kings/11103055.item#/submit*

*As With Gladness Men of Old: Christian Worship 83*

*Brightest and Best: Christian Worship 92*

**Scene 4: “Gifts” from the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers**

There are some situations where giving a gift feels like an obligation to fulfill. A housewarming gift for your new neighbors that you don’t have anything in common with and don’t really like, a holiday gift exchange with your office coworkers who aren’t really friends, a wedding present for the couple you barely know but were invited because you move in the same social circles—gift-giving in these settings is not a joyful experience. And unfortunately, the gift chosen can sometimes show that sense of obligation: that dusty bottle of wine that you don’t like, an impersonal Christmas ornament hastily chosen and quickly wrapped, one of the cheaper items from the wedding registry. The recipient isn’t very important to you, and therefore the process of choosing and giving the gift isn’t important either.

During his life on earth, Jesus also received “gifts” that reflected the disdain with which some viewed him. The Jewish leaders listened attentively to his teaching in the temple and then plotted to kill him. They asked him difficult theological questions and then accused him of blasphemy. They watched him heal the sick and raise the dead and then condemned him for doing so on the Sabbath. And the Roman soldiers? No one would want the gifts they gave: a beating during an illegal trial, a mocking purple robe, a crown of thorns, a pierced side to ensure death had come.

In the face of all of these terrible gifts, Jesus gave wonderful gifts in return. He lived a perfect life, never responding negatively to the unfair accusations of the Jewish leaders nor changing his message despite crowds deserting him. He died an innocent death, never lashing out against those mocking and tormenting and torturing him nor using his full powers to come down off the cross to exact vengeance. He offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin, satisfied the demands of a holy God whose divine justice could accept nothing less than perfection, and paid the price that no mere mortal could ever pay. And then he freely and fully credited this payment to our account, making us righteous in the eyes of his Father.

The Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers didn’t deserve to interact with Jesus. There was nothing inherently special about them, nothing that made them worthy of treating Jesus the way that they did. They were hypocritical religious leaders and unbelieving and uncaring military men more interested in keeping the peace than carrying out justice. In spite of all this, God chose the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers to play a part in his plan of salvation. He chose them as the ones who would pave Jesus’ path to the cross and kill the perfect and holy Lamb of God. He gave them the greatest gift: a Savior who died so that they might live.

*Every day [Jesus] was teaching at the temple. But the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders among the people were trying to kill him (Luke 19:47).*

**Musical Selection**

*Arise, My Soul, Arise: https://www.jwpepper.com/Arise,-My-Soul,-Arise/10341889.item#/*

*Lamb of God: https://www.handbellworld.com/music/MusicPiece.cfm?Piece=11198 or https://www.jwpepper.com/Lamb-of-God/8037590.item#/submit*

*What Wondrous Love Is This: Christian Worship 120*

**Scene 5: Gifts from the disciples**

Choosing a gift for a close friend can be fun. You know their likes and dislikes, their favorite colors and preferred styles, the things that they have always wanted but think are too frivolous to buy for themselves. You think you know them well enough to pick out the perfect gift. But the stakes are higher too. Missing the mark by getting them something they don’t like hurts more than missing the mark with a casual acquaintance. And because you are so close, you are more likely to see—and share in—their sense of disappointment. You will have a chance to try again at their next birthday or the next Christmas party, but that sense of disappointment will stick with you for awhile.

The disciples were Jesus’ closest friends on this earth. They spent three years learning from his teachings, marveling at his miracles, and participating in his entire public ministry. Time and time again, Jesus explained how his life had to end—with his death, yes, but also with his resurrection three days later. Despite the horrific events of Good Friday, the disciples *should* have been confident in the coming events of Easter Sunday. They *should* have stood by their teacher and master. He had kept all his other promises; why wouldn’t he keep this one as well? But instead, they gave him the gifts of doubt, fear, abandonment, and even denial. What *should* have been a joyous celebration turned into a fearful huddle in a locked room.

Jesus didn’t give the disciples what they deserved when he appeared to them that first Easter night. He didn’t chastise them for their desertion in Gethsemane or show disappointment in their lack of understanding at the garden tomb. Instead, through his resurrection, he gave them the certainty of a sacrifice accepted, the peace that can only come from God, the forgiveness of sins, and the promise to send the Holy Spirit to be with them as their work continued. These timid, trembling disciples were transformed into pillars of the Christian church. They would face opposition and persecution, and most would die a martyr’s death. The gifts from their risen Savior prepared them for this difficult work that lay ahead.

The disciples didn’t deserve to follow Jesus. There was nothing inherently special about them, nothing that made them worthy of being Jesus’ chosen twelve who would shepherd this new infant church. They were ordinary men: fishermen, a tax collector, even a religious zealot. In spite of all this, God chose the disciples to play a part in his plan of salvation. He chose them as the ones who were eyewitnesses to his Son’s life, death, and resurrection and who would spread that message of sins forgiven to the farthest corners of the earth. He gave them the greatest gift: a restored relationship with God that they couldn’t help but share.

*On the evening of the first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” (John 20:19).*

**Musical Selection**

*Triumphed O’er the Grave: https://www.jwpepper.com/Triumphed-Over-the-Grave/10558198.item#/submit*

*Come, You Faithful, Raise the Strain: Christian Worship 142*

*Welcome, Happy Morning: Christian Worship 163*

*We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight: Christian Worship Supplement 756*

**Scene 6: Gifts from us**

So how about you? Do you enjoy shopping for gifts, or is it a chore? Is it fun to hunt for the perfect gift for someone, or would you rather give a gift certificate so they can choose what they like? Have you purchased all of your Christmas presents, or will you be doing last-minute shopping in the days and weeks ahead? No matter how you feel about the process of getting there, there is still something special about watching others open gifts and opening them yourself—*especially* when you receive the perfect gift from someone who knows you so very well.

We might think that we are capable of giving gifts to God. When we compare our lives to the lives of “bad people,” we measure up pretty favorably. It’s likely that none of us here have ever murdered someone, stolen a car, or embezzled money from our employers. Many of us attend worship regularly, spend time in the Word and in prayer, and are involved in our church. Although we don’t always do the right thing, all of us would probably say we make the right decision more often than we make the wrong one. Surely all these good works and good intentions count for *something*, right? Surely they make us acceptable to God and worthy of his love?

We are acceptable to God and worthy of his love—but *not* because of anything that we have done. We can’t follow God’s requirement to be perfect and holy, and on our own, we can’t even follow his command to believe. God commands us to do what we cannot do on our own, and then in his grace and mercy, he gives us everything we need to fulfill this impossible command. He creates faith in our hearts, he gives us good works to do and neighbors to serve, and he will give us a white robe and a place in heaven one day. Yes, we are capable of pleasing God and living in a way that brings glory to his name, but only because he has given us the gift to be able to do so.

We don’t deserve to be members of God’s family. There is nothing inherently special about us, nothing that makes us worthy of being loved by God. We are sinful, imperfect women who, if we are honest with ourselves, fail to live lives worthy of our calling. In spite of all this, God chose us before the creation of the world to be a part of his plan of salvation. He gives us purpose in this life and hope for a perfect life to come. He has given us the greatest gift: the love of a Father and permanent standing in his family as his adopted daughters.

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins…But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions…For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:1,4,5,8,9).*

**Musical Selection**

*In the Bleak Midwinter: https://www.handbellworld.com/music/MusicPiece.cfm?Piece=16033 or https://www.jwpepper.com/sheet-music/search.jsp?keywords=in+the+bleak+midwinter*

*Today Your Mercy Calls Us: Christian Worship 339*

*Lord, ‘Tis Not that I Did Choose You: Christian Worship 380*

*God’s Own Child, I Gladly Say It: Christian Worship Supplement 737*

**Conclusion**

Regifting: the concept sparks impassioned opinions. Some of us believe it is perfectly acceptable to regift. If you get something you don’t like, why wouldn’t you pass it on to someone else who will enjoy it more? On the other hand, some of us would never regift. What could be more insensitive than giving someone a present you didn’t want? Regardless of your position on regifting, I’m guessing the thought has crossed your mind somewhere along the line.

There is one more gift that we have been given, and it is a gift that comes with no regifting debate. We have been given the true meaning of Christmas, the story of a baby in the manger that means more than all the secular Christmas preparations taking place around us. We have been given the knowledge of Jesus, the one who is true God and true man, who was born to die, and who now reigns in glory at God’s right hand. We have been given the story of salvation, the good news of sins forgiven, and the promise of a glorious and eternal home in heaven awaiting us one day. In short, we have been given news that changes lives—both here on this earth and in the life to come.

I can’t help you with your Christmas shopping. You have to make your own list and figure out what to get your family and friends. But along with those physical gifts, be sure to share the spiritual gift you have heard about today. Tell those around you about the reason for the hope that you have. There is no cost, no shopping, and no wrapping required. There is only the greatest gift that everyone around you needs. So follow God’s command to regift this gospel message—this good news of salvation—and give it away freely!

*Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the message of Christ…Let your conversation always be full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Colossians 4:2,3,6).*

Let’s close with prayer.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for giving us the greatest gift: the gift of your Son. During this Advent and Christmas season, give us opportunities to share this gift with the broken and hurting world in which we live. Help us remember that your Word will not return to you empty, but will accomplish what you desire and achieve the purpose for which you sent it. Thank you for calling us to share that Word, and bless us as we strive to share this good news with those around us. Amen.

**Closing Hymn**

*Go, Tell It on the Mountain (Christian Worship 57)*

*I Love to Tell the Story (Christian Worship 562)*

*How Quietly: https://www.jwpepper.com/How-Quietly/10009657.item#/submit*