

Christmas Comes Early: A Reason to Hope

1Corinthians 1: 3-9

There is a question going around in our house these days: "What do you want for Christmas?" Christmas is coming early this year. I know Advent has just begun and that infamous Christmas shopping season, but Christmas is coming early. In fact, it's already here. In fact, it's been here for quite some time according to what Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians.

It seems that God has some Christmas presents for us. The scripture passage for today includes Paul's greeting to the Corinthian Christians. In this greeting, he describes those presents. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What are the presents? The first present is peace. In a first-century world of *Pax Romanas*, true peace comes not as the result of military or political power, but through grace. Peace is not the gift of the Emperor, but comes only from God through gentle Jesus.

This present seems to be just as important today. In our society, we're looking for peace in so many places. We go to the mall and try to buy peace. What are we thinking? Maybe if we wear the right stuff, drive the right stuff, or give the right stuff, we'll feel good, feel loving, or feel loved and whole.

Maybe we'll find peace in security. It's become a national issue. What are we thinking? Maybe if we get enough police, enough weapons for military, and enough weapons for our citizens we'll have peace. Maybe if we limit or eliminate those who believe differently, and destroy those who oppose us, we'll be at peace.

God's peace is not found at shopping center. It is not found in having enough security. It is not found in homogeneous communities that think alike. We're seeking peace that can be bought at the mall, but all we find are hollow wishes for "peace on earth, good cheer to all". The first present is true peace, through grace, from God through and loving gentle Jesus.

The second present God gives us this Christmas is knowledge. Paul writes, "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him in speech and knowledge of every kind." This is *faith knowledge* that God is the source of the grace and peace we have. God is the source of all these Christmas presents, all the "gifts and benefits," the peace and the grace come from God. We know this by faith. It is by faith that believe that these gifts are from God

Let me be clear that I accept the theory of evolution. At the same time, I have faith in God as the source of life. I believe that Intelligent Design is not a scientific theory and that it serves to short change human inquiry and stop people from asking vital questions. I believe by faith in an evolving idea of who God is, how God relates, and what God does. By that same faith, I believe that all the gifts we receive come from God.

The third *Christmas present* is a benefits package. Paul writes, “the grace of God given in Christ enriched through Christ in speech and knowledge of every kind.” We have access to all God’s gifts through grace. One meaning of grace is freedom. This can be freedom from fear. It can also be freedom to connect to God, to each other, and to our deeper selves. Along with the grace comes the presence of Christ that enables us to grow in what we know and in how we can express our knowledge.

The fourth present is *us*. It is you yourselves and you yourself! Paul, as translated in the Message Version, writes, “The evidence of Christ has been clearly verified in your lives.” This is the gift of your unique story: where you’ve been, what you’ve done, when you’ve failed and how you’ve responded, and who you’re becoming. This is the gift of your unique blend of talents & skills -- what you bring to the table. It is the gift to yourself and to the rest of us of your experiences and challenges, your perspectives and methodology. It is your unique calling, where you’re going and how you will invest your life from now on.

The fifth Christmas present from God is wealth beyond measure. Paul writes, “so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” NRSV. In the Message, it sounds like this: “Just think--you don't need a thing, you've got it all! All God's gifts are right in front of you.

You’re the person who’s “got it all”. I always wanted to meet you! You’ve got everything you need. We’ve got everything we’ll ever need and the strength to endure. Again, Paul writes, “[God] will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.” NRSV. Integral to God’s gift of everything we need is the strength to endure and the ability to last, to make it through.

Finally, if you call write now, there’s a bonus present at no extra charge. “God is faithful; by God you were called into the fellowship of [the] Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” NRSV. The bonus is this: we have God to guide us and Christ to close for us, like a baseball team has a relief pitcher designated to close out the ball game and ensure victory for their team.

The description is even more graphic in The Message version: “And not only that, but God himself is right alongside to keep you steady and on track until things are all wrapped up by Jesus.” The bonus present is God as guarantor of all the gifts and all our lives. We will never be left alone and never stranded on the road.

Paul’s promise us, as he promised the Corinthians, that, “God, who got you started in this spiritual adventure, shares with us the life of his Son and our Master Jesus. He will never give up on you. Never forget that.”

What can we expect this Christmas? What present shall we look for from God, all wrapped up in a package with ribbon and a bow, as we celebrate the coming of Jesus that brings hope to the world. What is God’s Word to us? What is the meaning of the coming of Christ, of God being born in Jesus – this incarnation we celebrate at Christmas?

Today’s Word is hope. The meaning of God Christmas presents to us is hope. We hope there is freedom to live and freedom to discover the path of our deepest belief without God condemning us and with God loving us.

We hope for a reason to hope. We need to hope. George Verity was an agnostic who came to Christian faith in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. He survived while watching many others die. As you can imagine, he asked himself “why?” The answer he was left with was “hope.” He had a sense of hope, a sometimes irrational belief in the future that literally made the difference between death and life. We can believe in life and that hope lets us live beyond our fear.

What is the meaning of hope for us? What are the implications of hope for this congregation, Crossroads Church. Hope means that we have the expectation we’ll succeed as church. This congregation has been alive for seven years this February. It’s been four years for me as your pastor. When I came, I told some of you that growth would involve some attrition -- growth would include losing some people. I said this even before knowing how many “original” attendees had already gone with no new members added during those early years.

During the past four years, several more people have gone. Some of these were on fringes of our congregational life, but some were at the core, at that time. This seems to be the cost of getting clearer in identity and direction. At the same time, over the past almost years, we have added at least twenty new people. These are people who are choosing to come and walk with us. This is hope for our future. Those here now, and those choosing to join, want to be here. They seek not only “getting what I need,” but even more a place to give and an opportunity to grow. We have strong hope in the future of Crossroads.

What else does hope mean? It means that we will have opportunities as a church to address some of the larger questions of our time. We will have the opportunity to help clarify the message of Christianity that the presence of God is found in communities of people who are bearing one another’s burdens, striving for growth, and seeking wholeness.

There is hope in the presence of the Spirit in community. This Spirit guides us to find deep truth about our living. This Spirit guides us to affirm that peace comes from love, not power. Peace comes through love, not security. Peace comes as a result of love, not denial of our fear.

To open this gift of hope means to embrace our mission of being the Good News we proclaim, especially during this season. This mission is to embody God in our life as church so that when anyone touches this community, when anyone comes into this community, when anyone encounters any of us any day, any place, they will find God, the Holy Spirit, the living Christ.

Hope means that we choose to believe life can be transformed. Hope means that God was born in Jesus so that people could recognize God when they met him again in other people. Hope means that God is born in people, in communities of people, so that we can recognize her when we discover her again along the paths we walk each day, and in the darkness as we fall asleep each night.

Hope is a *dogged determination* for each of us keep breathing, to keep moving forward in life. Hope is our choice to step away from cynicism and not cling to despair. Hope is our reason to step away from living a “me-centered” life. God’s gift to us, the

Christmas present called hope, is here for us to open, even now during this Advent season.

Community is the key to the blessings of which Paul writes in his greeting to the Corinthians. Donald Miller, author of the book *Blue Like Jazz*, told a story about the importance of community. After living virtually alone for several years, he was persuaded to share a house with five other young men. The process was one of self-discovery. A lot of what he learned about himself was not very positive. The telling piece of truth for him was that his life is not a story about himself with others coming in on occasion to play minor parts.

Faith is not a solitary proposition. Community is fundamental to faith and to hope. As we move toward Christmas, with a certain ambivalence at the rampant consumerism mixed with a message of peace, our hope is in the Christmas present God gives us early, through the four weeks of Advent. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, our hope is that each of us will dare to live fully and all of us will dare to live in community, sharing life together at a deeper level as Christian friends.

Let's open this Christmas present, trusting that we're the people who've "got it all" -- everything we need -- everything we'll ever need. With all this, we also have the strength to endure. So, let us move forward to become the persons we can be and to become the church of our potential. This Advent season, and beyond, let us be the living presence of the living Christ in this world today.