

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve Midnight + December 24, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Under Wraps

The Word of the Lord from Luke 2:10-12: "And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the cold and the dark of winter, Christmas has come; and as you look under the tree, there's one gift, only one, with your name on the tag. It's all right with you that there's only one gift, because you've only wanted one thing this Christmas, and the shape of the box is just the right size. It's been there for a couple of weeks now, covered in paper and ribbon. It's been in your home – it's more or less belonged to you this entire time, but it's still concealed in its wrapping. But now it's Christmas, and Christmas is when gifts are opened and revealed. Now you take that one little package, slide the ribbon, pull the tape and ease the box out of the paper. Now you open the lid, and there it is. Just what you wanted. Just what you needed. Now, it's not just an unseen hope, awaited with expectation. Now it is there for you to see.

In Bethlehem on Christmas, one gift is given for all the world – and a gift that the people of God have been waiting for almost as long as the earth has been around. Look closely, because a very good thing has come in a very small package. He's wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

The first to find out are the shepherds. The angel of the Lord appears to them, the glory of the Lord shines around them, and they are filled with great fear. The angel says, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Rejoice, shepherds! The Christ has come! The gift is given – and the angel tells you precisely how the gift is wrapped! The Son of the Most High, the King of kings and the Lord of lords is to be found nearby. The eternal Lord of heaven and earth is wrapped up in flesh and blood, with a ribbon of swaddling cloths. Without the angel's description, the shepherds might well run right past the manger and say, "We don't have time for a baby – we're looking for the Christ!" But no, the Christ is the baby; and in reality, His flesh and blood are more than just a wrapping. They are a part of Him, for God has become man to save. Fully God, fully man, for you.

You know why He has become man to save. Keep in mind that God taking on human flesh is far less useful for Him than it would be for you or me to go about our lives while wearing oven mitts. He's not doing it for Himself, but for you. Because you've got that fragile, sin-damaged and dying body and mind, soul and spirit, He has taken on His own fragile-but-holy body and mind, soul and spirit. He becomes man to take your place, to purchase your redemption by His own death.

That's why He is here: Jesus is born of Mary to be the Savior, Christ the Lord; and He can't be the Savior without flesh and blood and a cross.

So we stop and peer into the manger. For every last century up to the birth of Jesus, the world has lived in darkness, knowing sin and death, knowing that something is missing, trying to make up for it and failing miserably. For every last century up to the birth of Jesus, the people of God have watched and

waited for the Lord to keep His promise and send the Savior ... waiting for the gift of salvation to be given.

Here it is. Here He is. One little infant, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. He is no longer an unseen hope. He is there for all to see.

He is there for you. No matter how joyful your Christmas, you're still in a world of darkness with plenty of worries near at hand; and this world struggles along in its hopeless attempts to find peace and light. You live in hope because the angels' message to shepherds is for you too: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." You live in hope because the Savior has come; and you live in hope because the Savior is coming again.

+++

He grows up, of course. He doesn't save by being swaddled. After thirty plus years of life that includes time in Nazareth and Egypt, He ends up about five miles away from the manger on a hill called Calvary. Instead of adoring shepherds, He's surrounded by all nations calling for His imminent death. Instead of being wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger, He'll soon be wrapped in burial cloths and laid in a tomb. This Savior has a knack for getting the worst of beds.

We stop at the cross this night because you really can't celebrate Christmas right without Easter in mind. A brand-new baby is far more joyful than a crucifixion, but the Infant in the manger is born to be the Savior, and this is how He is chosen to save you from before the foundation of the world.

So as you've peered into the manger, now look at the cross and the Christ, crucified. And then, as you look away, look beneath it. Look carefully beneath that Tree of Life, and there you see gifts. Many, many gifts. The wrapping is not in the best of shape. Some of the gifts are still rather pretty and bright, all done up in fresh color and bows, but still with frayed corners and imperfections, like a still-serviceable tent with wear and tear. Some are rather faded and stained. Some are wrapped in boxes of wood and metal, ready to be laid to rest for a while; and many more are already treasures buried in the ground.

See, because the gift in the manger is Jesus, the gifts under the cross are His people. They are redeemed by His death, washed clean by the water and the blood. Those gifts under the cross include you, the baptized and repentant people of God. The Savior born in Bethlehem and crucified on Calvary has washed you clean by Holy Baptism. He has washed your robes and made them white in His blood. He has strengthened you with His Word, fed you with His body and blood. Where you were once lost, hopeless and cut off from God, God now declares you a treasure because He has redeemed you at the cost of His only-begotten Son. On the Last Day, the Son will present you to His Father, holy and without blemish. Imagine: you, a present from God the Son to God the Father on the Last Day. You!

But as I said, until then the wrapping paper isn't in the best shape. On this side of heaven, you're still clothed in your old sinful flesh. The wrapping is getting kinda wrinkled and scarred, with stains and wear and tear. There are aches and pains and discomfort that come with age, with injury and illness. There are the bad memories and the nagging conscience from those times you did something rash or cheapened yourself with some sin. And since you know more about you than anybody else, and since you've got to live with yourself, you know better than anybody that you're not exactly the perfect gift.

But for the sake of the Savior, Christ the Lord, you *are* – and you will be. For now, you're the gift in bad wrapping, waiting to be revealed on the Last Day. For now, you're a seed, waiting to be planted and raised up in full bloom and glory. For now, you see beaten up, beaten down, wearing-out, sinful you. But you walk by faith, not by sight. For the sake of Jesus, you're forgiven. For the sake of Jesus, you're a

new creation to be revealed. For the sake of Jesus, God sees you now as you haven't yet seen yourself, how you will bear for eternity – perfect in every way. Perfect sight and perfect healing. Perfect digestion and mobility. Perfectly rested. Perfect fitness and perfect strength. A perfectly clear mind and a perfectly clear conscience. All that is given you already with forgiveness. You don't see it yet because you're still wrapped up in sinful flesh. You don't see it yet, but God the Father does. He sees you as you will be revealed on the Last Day, the wrappings of this life torn away. He sees you as you already are in Christ.

Because of the Savior born in Bethlehem, you're no longer a sinner lost and far from God. The Lord declares that you're worth the price of His Son's own blood. That's why you rejoice in daily repentance, so that you're a perfect gift on the Last Day, not something broken and cast away.

This also means, of course, that those around you are likewise wrapped and likewise priceless. All are redeemed by the Savior, Christ the Lord: the angel says that the baby in Bethlehem is good news and great joy for all people. The great tragedy is that many do not want His redemption, and so they refuse His gifts of Christmas and Easter. Not so you: you do not lose hope, for the Savior has come. You do not cheapen yourself with sin, for you're redeemed at great cost by the Savior who is coming again. No, you live in joy and hope, a light in a dark and dying world. You treat others with the love of Christ, even the more annoying types you run into, and not just when you're trying to be nice at Christmas; because even if you find them difficult, you know that the Lord has declared them to be worth dying for. That's why you sing and speak the praises of God to all who will hear, because you earnestly desire that they be unwrapped and revealed to be new creations in Christ on the Last Day.

All of this is true because the baby in the manger is Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God. He is given by His Father to be Your Redeemer by His life, by His death, by His resurrection and ascension, and by His coming again in glory when you are revealed to be what He has made you.

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to His people on earth. Rejoice in the gift of Christmas, the birth of Jesus – rejoice in His incarnation, for He becomes man to save you. Rejoice in those around you, for whether they are given to give you joy or teach you patience, they are gifts of God redeemed by Christ for you.

Rejoice my friends, and merry Christmas! For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

In the name of Jesus. Amen