

Christmas Day Devotion – The Greatest Gift
Dec 25th 2020
Pr Ruth Ann Loughry

Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! God's overflowing love and peace be with you this day; the day of our Lord's birth.

Can you remember a very special gift someone gave you? Take your mind back to a time when someone gave you a truly remarkable gift. What was it? An engagement ring? A book? A bicycle? Another whatever it is of whatever it is you collect? (smile)

I'm truly hoping that all of us can think of at least one gift that touched our hearts. Or made us cry. Or a gift that took us by surprise.

Once many years ago, a daughter's elementary school offered what was like a market so children could get gifts for their families. (You can tell how many years ago this was, given that schools now celebrate Winter break instead of Christmas break.)

Parents weren't allowed in, but the mother couldn't help herself. She peeked into the gymnasium and saw her daughter moving from table to table to get gifts for Mom, Dad and Brother. Christmas morning, the little girl was so excited to pass her gifts out.

"I have the perfect gift for you Mommy! I picked it out all by myself!"

Her mother opened the package and it was a small statue of a frog sitting in a rocking chair reading a newspaper. The headline on the newspaper said, "Greatest Grandpa in the Whole World".

The mother said, "I've kept that gift and to this day 75 years later, it is one of my favorites. It's not the gift, it's the giver."

This year you may have a few gifts to open. You might have nothing - no physical packages or cards - to open.

Yet, the one gift we all received, is Jesus Christ, Himself. Listen to John talk about this gift.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

There it is! There is the gift. It is a gift not one of us asked for. A gift not one of us deserved. But the giver – God – loved us so much...that we didn't get a plastic frog reading a newspaper. No, we received God's only Son.

Say it with me slowly, just that first phrase. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

1. God loved the world. Yes you and me – absolutely. But God's love is so much bigger than that! God loved the entire world, the cosmos, the universe that God had made. God loved it!
2. Hence, that's why God gave the cosmos, the gift of God's Son. For those of you who have children, you understand the intimate connection between parent and child. Reflect upon that for a moment. God allowed, gave, sent, Jesus to come to earth. God knew what the ending would be. God gave us Jesus anyway.
3. Third gift, eternal life in Jesus Christ. God grants us the ability to believe in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we have eternal life through God's Son, our Messiah, our Savior. Life beyond this mortal body. Life everlasting, living with all the saints.
4. Lastly, for anyone listening out there who thinks they aren't good enough. "Oh, Jesus could never really love me." "Jesus would never forgive me." No. Listen again to verse 17. *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*

On this Christmas day, truly what other gifts do we need? Nothing. The giver and the gift are more than we can comprehend. If you're feeling a bit down or lonely or even happy today, take time to reflect upon the Gift God has given us in Jesus Christ. Let Jesus touch your heart and maybe even take you by surprise! Amen. Merry Christmas!

Sunday after Christmas – December 27, 2020
Pastor Ruth Ann Loughry

Merry Christmas! God's grace and peace to you this day! I'm going to share a portion of Bishop Elizabeth Eaton's Christmas message: She and others were listening to the stories of women who tried to migrate to the United States. I quote...

"I remember one young woman in particular. She was pregnant when she tried to migrate to the United States. She had the baby somewhere along the way. She was far from home, mostly alone and desperately wanted her mother to be with her. None of this is what she had hoped for when she was growing up. Circumstances beyond her control had forced her into this new and strange existence. She and her baby were now back in Honduras—but not at home. Home - was too dangerous.

Remember last Christmas? Remember all of the preparations, the travel to be with family? Remember the holy beauty of the Christmas Eve liturgy and receiving Christ's grace and forgiveness at his table? The shopping and Christmas caroling? The in-person gatherings? All that has changed.

The pandemic hasn't forced us from our homes but into our homes, sheltering in place, isolated. Not together, but physically distanced. Not gathered with family and friends, but forced apart because of the threat of infection. Forced by circumstances beyond our control into this strange existence. Oh, there will be Christmas carols piped into grocery stores and other essential services, but they will be painful reminders of how life used to be.

We are reminded of the experience of the exiles in Babylon: "By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captives asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land" (Psalm 137)?

I told the young Honduran woman about another young woman who was forced to leave home because of a government decree. She, too, was pregnant and made a long and difficult journey. She, too, was far from home and without her mother when the baby came. She had to find shelter wherever she could. This wasn't what

she had hoped for when she was growing up. Circumstances beyond her control had forced her into this new existence. That young woman was Mary and the child was Jesus.

Precisely in our distress, in our *dislocation*, the Lord shows up. Emmanuel—God with us—makes his home in the very places we find foreign or isolating. All of us, can find hope because of the birth of Mary’s child. There is no God-forsaken place and we are never alone— not in hospital rooms, or sheltering in place, or in Zoom calls or on dangerous roads.

Many of us will not be physically home for Christmas, but we are truly home in Christ.”

I would add to Rev. Eaton’s words, that not only are we truly home in Christ, but that Christ is home with us. Listen to John’s Gospel the first chapter.

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

The Word – Jesus Christ – became flesh and lived among us! God moved into our neighborhoods! This incarnate One – God Emmanuel – which means God with us....means that Jesus is very much at home with us.

Most of us have seen way too much of the four walls of our houses in these last ten months! We may be tired of being ‘home.’ Yet because God in Christ Jesus became flesh and lived among us, that means that God is also at home with us.

Bishop Eaton is exactly right. Perhaps this year there were no plane tickets or road trips. A zoom link or phone call is the best we can do to keep Gramma safe. Yet,

when we click 'Leave meeting' or hang up the phone, we aren't alone in our homes and neither is Gramma. Jesus is there too! Jesus is right there. Listen to Jesus again in John 14:18-24. ¹⁸*I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you.* ¹⁹*In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live.* ²⁰*On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.* ²¹*They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them."* ²²*Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?"* ²³*Jesus answered him, "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."*

The word for 'home' in that passage means 'abide' or 'remain' or 'stay'. Those who love me will keep my word and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.'

If your house doesn't feel like a 'home with God' – talk to Jesus about that. Invite Him into every room. Allow Jesus to take up residence in your kitchen when He pulls up a chair to share a meal. Grant him entrance to your office where you pay the bills and the living room, where you watch movies and relax. Give Jesus permission to pull up your covers and tuck you in tight. Jesus is already there...think of your home as His home. Because it is! The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The whole point of Christmas: the Word – Jesus Christ – became flesh and dwelt among us! Merry Christmas! Amen.