

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

OUR ADVENT JOURNEY

Today marks the conclusion of our Advent series: “All I Want For Christmas.”

Over the last several weeks we’ve been unwrapping some of the gifts of God’s grace presented in James Moore’s book All I Want for Christmas:

1. First, we heard of the Gift of Good News – a reminder that God is with us, in the good times as well as the hard times.
2. Pastor Randy then talked about the Gift of New Understanding. This Christmas gift reminds us that God cares deeply about us and cares about how we spend this life we’ve been given. God chose to demonstrate that love and care in an astounding way. He sent Jesus to us as a tiny baby born in very humble surroundings. A baby who would grow up to manifest God’s love for us by how he cared for others as he taught them and healed them. But Jesus didn’t stop at just being a good role model. Jesus showed the ultimate measure of God’s love:
 - 1) by taking on the burden of our sin and the sins of the whole world
 - 2) by dying on the cross as he took the punishment that we deserve
 - 3) and finally, by being raised from the dead to show that he has conquered the power of sin and death and now offers us forgiveness of our sins and eternal life in the presence of Jesus and our Heavenly Father. How awesome and amazing is that?
3. Pastor Lauren shared with us about the Gift of a Strong Foundation. We will be able to weather the storms of life when we rely on the strong foundation of Jesus Christ.
4. Last week we heard about the Gift of a New Style of Living. Pastor Randy spoke about living out our faith on a daily basis by committing ourselves to prayer, repentance, witnessing and loving others as God loves us.

This new way of living, this life committed to Christ, has a profound impact on our own spiritual lives. But an amazing side effect of our new style of living is its impact on others:

- 1) The life committed to Christ becomes compelling. It draws on that well of living water, Christ himself, that constantly fills us and renews us.
- 2) The life committed to Christ becomes contagious. Our attitudes and behaviors speak volumes. When other people observe the committed life, they want what you have:
 - a. The constancy of knowing God’s love
 - b. The strength to endure in all situations
 - c. The power to forgive others
 - d. The courage to ask for forgiveness
 - e. The peace that passes understanding
- 3) The life committed to Christ becomes convincing, because others can see you don’t just “talk the talk” but you really walk through life in a way that consistently models Christ – that is a huge part of our Christian witness.

CHRISTMAS IS OVER. NOW WHAT?

The season of Advent in the Church is intended to help us slow down a little from our hectic pace of life and ponder the miracles of God and the gifts of his Grace, especially the gift of Jesus – God manifest in the flesh, God with us.

I've always been a person who likes to ask questions, lots of questions about almost anything. I guess I never completely grew up, because I know sometimes I sound like the four-year-old who keeps asking "why?"

So now, Advent and Christmas have come and gone. Today we conclude the Advent series with a question – a question you may have asked yourself: Okay, I've "unwrapped" God's gift of grace, **now what?**

Do we just pick up where we left off at the beginning of Advent and return our attention to the crazy daily routine dealing with work, kids, grandkids and all the other things that take up so much of our time and stress many of us out?

Or, has this Advent season made a difference for us? How do we want our New Year 2019 to be different?

Every year we hear people say, "why can't everyday be like Christmas? I love how it makes me feel, and people are actually nice to each other." I even heard a song played frequently on Christian radio over the past few weeks that was actually titled "Why Can't Everyday Be Like Christmas?" The truth is, we know that everyday can't be an emotional high that makes us feel good all the time. Life has plenty of valleys and pot holes in the road that sometimes make the journey uncomfortable. So what do we do?

One thing that James Moore recommends is sharing with others the gifts of grace that we've received over this Advent season. He called them the "gifts that always fit." Among them he mentions giving our time to others. Have you ever caught yourself saying to someone, "I just don't have time right now.?" Perhaps you've said it to your child or to an elderly relative who lives alone. I know I've said it on multiple occasions. But, what may seem like an inconvenience for us at the time can actually be an opportunity for blessings.

I think of my six year old granddaughter who, like any six year old, often wants my undivided attention. And sometimes that comes at impractical times. But I've found that when I take just a few minutes to spend with her, she is so delighted that I would play in whatever imaginary world she has created. Her energy, her enthusiasm, her joy – they bless me and she makes me smile.

Or I think of those many folks who are unable to get out of their house very often and don't get much interaction with others except for doctors' visits. For many of them depression and loneliness are their everyday companions. Giving them the gift of your time is enormous. They will tell you what a blessing it is to them when you spend time with them, but you are equally blessed. It is a humbling and holy time when you give your time and your undivided attention to others.

THE LESSON OF THE MAGI

I want to come back for a minute to the question: NOW WHAT?
And maybe add another question: WHY DO ANYTHING DIFFERENT?

Perhaps the story of the Magi can help shed some “light” on these questions for us.
We know they followed a star – a light in the sky. What about that light? Why is it important?

We know that “light” is important to us in a physical way. We can see light. We need light in order for plants to grow; we need light to see what we’re doing or where we’re going. We usually feel warmth from light sources. We rely on light for so many things.

But have you ever thought about light from a spiritual perspective? In one sense, “Light” becomes a metaphor for how we partially understand God. The theme of light is a thread that is woven throughout the Bible.

We see that thread in the Scriptures as “light” plays an important role in the lives of the people of God:

- At the very beginning, when the world was only darkness and void, God spoke “*let there be light, and there was light.*” (Gen. 1:3) God’s presence was made known by bringing forth light.
- In the wilderness of the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites were led at night by a column of fire (light) to illuminate their way. (Ex. 13:21) That light was the manifestation of God’s presence, going before them.
- At the birth of Jesus, the shepherds on the hillside were surrounded by light:
⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. (Luke 2:8–10) God was present on the hillside.
- The Magi followed the light of the star, and at the end of their journey they discovered Jesus and offered him their gifts. The light of the star revealed God in a manger.
- In the Gospel of John, he refers to Jesus in terms of light, “*In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.*” (John 1:4-5)
- Jesus told his disciples, “*¹⁴ “You are the light of the world... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:14a,16) Jesus passed the light to us so that we might let it shine forth to others who don’t yet know the light.
- Even Paul, who hated the early Christians and hunted them down, encountered the living Christ in a bright light.
³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.
(Acts 9:3)

Paul’s life was changed forever because he now understood who Jesus is and the power of what he’s done for each one of us.

What about each of us? In the process of the Advent journey, how have you encountered the living Christ?

What do you do with that? How do you answer the “now what” question?

Will you go back to the same old routine, or will you let the light of Christ be in you and shine through you?

Will you let your life be changed forever?

It’s easier to understand where we’ve been and where we’re going when we understand how the story of God unfolds in the pages of Scripture. Because it’s really our story as well – the good and the bad and how God loves us enough, even with our faults, to send a Savior in the person of Jesus. It’s all in there.

It’s easier to let our light shine when we stand on that firm foundation of Christ and know in our hearts who he is what we believe about him. It is my belief that the greatest gift we can pass on to others is Jesus Christ himself, the light of hope, joy, peace and love.

And if someone asks us, “what do you believe?” Are you prepared to answer?

I’d like to close today with the Statement of Faith of the Korean Methodist Church. It is one way to express what we understand and what we believe about God. There are several such affirmations in the back of our hymnal. I invite you to take a look at them and ponder the question, “what do I believe?” Will you stand as you are able and join me now as we affirm our faith together.

We believe in the one God, creator and sustainer of all things, Father of all nations, the source of all goodness and beauty, all truth and love.

We believe in Jesus Christ, God manifest in the flesh, our teacher, example, and Redeemer, the Savior of the world.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, God present with us for guidance, for comfort, and for strength.

We believe in the forgiveness of sins, in the life of love and prayer, and in grace equal to every need.

We believe in the Word of God contained in the Old and New Testaments as the sufficient rule both of faith and of practice.

We believe in the church, those who are united in the living Lord for the purpose of worship and service.

We believe in the reign of God as the divine will realized in human society, and in the family of God, where we are all brothers and sisters.

We believe in the final triumph of righteousness and in the life everlasting.

Amen.

CLOSING PRAYER

Most Holy God,

You are the light that shines into our lives.

Grant us wisdom and understanding so that we may be good stewards of this precious gift. May your light shine through us so that others may see and know you and give you all the glory.

In the name of Christ Jesus, our Lord and Savior,

AMEN.