

“All I Want For Christmas”
“The Gift of New Understanding”

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Key Text: Luke 1 39-56

I. Introduction: Why Am I So Highly Favored?

“Why am I so favored? How many of you think you know it all? How many would actually admit it if you did? None of us know it all even if we think we might know more than others. Last week we said if Christmas is about anything, it is about giving. Not just what we might give to others, but also about what God gives to us.

Drew Sappington of Florida shared how he remembered being able to give his very first Christmas gift. Can you remember giving your first gift? Maybe to your parents, grandparents, teachers?

Drew’s parents gave him some money and let him walk across the street to a shopping area close to their home. He walked into a jewelry store and laid the coins on the counter. The clerk proceeded to help him pick out a costume jewelry pin and a purple scarf for his mother. He recalls, “That Christmas, for the first time, I was as eager to see my mother open her gift as I was to open mine”.

Isn’t it great when we realize there is a greater thrill in giving than in receiving?

Drew came to this conclusion, “I could give my mother nothing that had not already been given to me”.

How true is that? Any mother would be pleased with such gifts from her child.

Now think about this, can we give anything to God that didn’t come from God in the first place? And when we give back to God, don’t you think God is just as pleased as was Drew’s mother? It was King David in the collecting of items and funds for the building of the temple who said, “We have only given You what comes from Your hand”. (I Chronicles 29:14)

II. Gifts From God

Mary and Elizabeth must have felt the same way as they sat together thinking about the babies they were carrying in their wombs. They both recognize the children they are carrying are gifts to them from God. They might not understand everything about God’s plan and purpose for these children but they both sense these children are heavenly gifts. For most people, the same would be true.

Interesting that going into this first Christmas these two women, one much younger than the other, have time, make time to sit together and reflect and to share their joy and amazement. They hung out for three months.

Elizabeth feels so blessed by God and by Mary’s visit. What a gift of time spent and shared together. The sad truth? Families today are so busy we don’t spend enough time together. Even for Christmas we hop from one event, one home, one party, to another. I’m not blaming anyone, it’s what we’ve come to expect as normal. In the hustle and bustle and madness, I wonder if in the moment we can slow down, maybe hit the pause button and sit and share together, maybe not 3 months, but just 3 days, or 3 hours—but more than 3 minutes and talk with each other, care for one another?

III. Christmas Helps Us With a New Perspective of God

There are all kinds of Christmas gifts God wants us to unwrap.

One is how we understand God. So often people think of God as far off. An old gray headed man sitting on a throne. Some may see God as a puppeteer and thus, themselves, as puppets. We may look at the Old Testament and think God is an angry, vengeful, punishing God. If you have ever asked, “God, what did I do to deserve this?” or

“God, why did you allow that to happen to that person or community?” and, by the way, most of us have; then that might say something about the picture we have of God.

At Christmas, Jesus comes to show us what God is really like. Not some cosmic commander just trying to destroy evil and keep order in the world like Thor.

God comes down to earth in the form of a baby named Jesus. The incarnation is about God putting on flesh. Growing and developing in the womb of a young girl named Mary who can say “my soul glorifies the Lord”, being born in a manger not a palace. Who would know our temptations, yet not sin. Who would know our griefs and sorrows and even shed tears, but who could bring hope and peace and comfort like no other. Who would show compassion on all people, teach us who our neighbors are and how to love them, who would heal the sick and sin-weary soul. Who would take on the sins of the whole world, suffer and die and then rise again. For whatever understanding we might have of God, Jesus comes to us to show us God is love, full of grace, abounding in mercy. And for those who will repent and humble themselves and turn to God, God offers the gift of everlasting life.

IV. What Mary and Elizabeth Understood

There may well have been things Elizabeth and Mary did not understand, along with Zechariah and Joseph. They did understand their lives were about to change forever and they understood God was in it. Though Mary says the words, I’m quite certain Elizabeth also felt God had “done great things” for her as well. Can you think of what great things God has done for you? What mighty or even small things has God done for you? How have you experienced the heavenly gifts of mercy and grace and forgiveness in your own life?

When has God lifted you up when you were down? With what good things has God filled you with?

For Elizabeth and Mary, it seems to be gratitude, awe, wonder, joy, blessings. It is God who has been mindful of them both. My best guess is God is more mindful of each of us than we might imagine.

Jesus comes and gives us a new understanding of God. What new understanding might we grasp this Advent season? James Moore, whose book many are reading this Advent season says, “Christmas gives us a new picture of God’s compassion and tenderness, out of which we can form a new relationship with God, built not on fear, but on love!” (pg 41)

V. Sharing a Right Perspective of God with Others

Folks, that’s a powerful new perspective and when you or I have an opportunity to share our faith with others, it’s important that we share a correct perspective with others on who and what God is really like and how we see and experience God. Let me let you in on something. We’ve sent over 100 cards out this past week to people in our church family and over 200 emails to people in our community with a prayerful and hopeful attempt to reconnect them to God, faith and their church family and for many in our community who attended Trunk or Treat this year, an invitation to connect with God, many for the very first time. When folks show up here with their families, what image, or picture or understanding of God do we want to give them?

If people come, and they will, we have a wonderful story to share both in song and word and prayer and mission and message. We have a God whose love and grace and hope has filled our hearts and part of our new understanding here at Christmas is that one of our key purposes is to share that story, to celebrate God’s love and pass this story and this love on to as many as we can.

VI. Making Room In Our Heart, Our Homes, Our Church

And unlike the inn keeper who had to send Mary and Joseph on to the barn, we want to make room for all who come. Why would anyone want to come? Maybe to see if there’s anything to this God story, to see if people in the church are “kinder and gentler” than a violent world. Maybe to gain a first time or new understanding of what Christmas is really all about.

And folks, we have the best gift of all to offer people. May God open our hearts and minds anew and afresh, may people who receive invitations be encouraged to come experience Christmas here with us, and may many encounter the living God in new ways and, like Mary, be filled with “the good things of God”.

VII. Closing Prayer

Let us Pray:

O God, on this second week of Advent we recognize you opened the eyes and hearts of Mary and Elizabeth. Would you open our eyes and hearts to see you differently, to see our neighbors differently and to gain a fresh perspective on why you’ve called us to be Your church? We ask You give us new understanding. What a wonderful Christmas gift that would be. That we might truly know how deep, how high, how wide is Your love for Your world, even us, so we might know just how favored we are and then help us share your love with others.

In Jesus’ Name,

Amen.