

UNWRAPPING THE GIFT

December 20, 2009

Texts – Micah 5: 2 - 5a, 6: 8
Luke 2: 1 - 7

What will you do with all of the wrapping paper on Christmas morning? It may not be a question you've spent a lot of time pondering. Indulge me for a few moments please.

First of all, let's admit that some families are blessed to have at least one person with what childhood psychologists mistakenly call an "obsessive compulsive disorder." I say "blessed" because on Christmas morning those of us with OCD take care of the wrapping paper problem for the rest of you. Far from being "disordered," we go around picking up all the torn and discarded pieces of wrapping paper and place them neatly in boxes or trash bags. Some of us even manage to move it all out into the garage before the last present has been unwrapped.

Oh sometimes I manage to pick up a present or two along with all the debris, and that doesn't make me particularly popular with some family members, but that's okay. If you truly are obsessively compulsive about having everything neat and tidy you don't mind sorting through the trash two or three times. Besides, it gives you something to do while the rest of the family prepares the breakfast!

I'm tempted to ask for a show of hands of how many of you share this so-called "disorder" with me, but I won't. We know, don't we?, that it really is a blessing and not a curse. And we know that the rest of you are secretly grateful to have us around to pick up after you!

These "faults" and "foibles" of ours are silly, aren't they? Better to laugh than to cry about them; the latter does precious little good anyway. My point here, however, is simply that we will unwrap those gifts on Christmas morning. No matter how pretty they may be with their ribbons and bows . . . never mind the lovely designs and sparkling color of the paper someone

has so carefully folded . . . it will all come off on Friday morning, whether the hands which hold them are three or seventy three years old. It's not the wrapping we want; it's the gift within.

The same is true, or ought be, of the season we are in the midst of. There is a precious gift here, make no mistake, and it has been lovingly wrapped for us by many hands over many years in many different cultures. Layer upon layer of "paper" enfold this special gift. Some we can readily identify.

There is, first of all, the whole Santa tradition which permeates the Western World's celebration of Christmas. So accustomed to it, enraptured by it, and inculcated in it are we that it can come as a surprise to learn that millions of our fellow Christians around the world celebrate the birth of Christ without any knowledge whatsoever of our fabled Santa Claus. There are no Christmas trees or Santa Clauses, and certainly no Frosty the Snowmen, in the Church of South India's celebration of Christmas. The flower with which we adorn our sanctuary and homes – the poinsettia – is present there, but it is so in the same way that the daisy or the day lily is present along our roadsides in summer. There is absolutely nothing "special" or "festive" about it. It is simply part of the landscape, just as the Santa Claus tradition is part of the cultural landscape of our particular way of doing things. It is the wrapping paper we have fashioned to decorate the gift we understand Christ's birth to be for all of humanity. Together they say –

What lies within is beautiful and comes as a present from One who knows all of your secrets and still loves you unconditionally.

There are, of course, still more layers of wrapping paper around this gift. Many of them are to be found in the pages of this old book. "*But you O Bethlehem Ephrathath, who are little to be among the clans of Judah,*" the prophet Micah says, for instance, "*from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*"

[Micah 5: 2] We hear it, you and I, as an oracle foretelling the birth of Jesus. In fact, it comes

from a time seven hundred years before that birth and was, in its original setting, a profound expression of hope for a wise and just ruler who would ascend the throne of a small Middle Eastern nation. Through it Micah gives voice to the longing for security and peace which has been known in every time and every place. Wrapping it around the gift which is Christ is a way of saying – **What lies within is the answer to the timeless yearning in every heart for both justice and peace.**

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled,” another layer of our wrapping paper proclaims; *“and she (Mary) gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger,”* it continues.

[Luke 2: 1, 7] For me this is the most beautiful and compelling of all the layers which surround the gift. It speaks of the simple humanity which characterizes every aspect of the divine. It also proclaims the profoundly sacred dignity of every child’s birth and life. Harkening back to Micah’s imagery, one our most beautiful Christmas carols proclaims – “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.” It speaks, of course, of that ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem,’ but it speaks as well of you and me and every human life that has drawn its first breath *“wrapped in swaddling cloths,”* be that lying *“in a manger”* or in a bassinet or a cradle or a bed. It matters not.

I speak of it here, of course, as “wrapping paper,” and I know that may surprise or even shock some among us. That is not my intention nor my hope. It was none other than Martin Luther almost four hundred years ago who said that when the wise men came to the manger, they did not bow down and worship the cradle in which the Christ Child lay; they came, instead, to worship the Christ who lay within it. The Bible, he went on, is like that cradle: we approach it not to worship it but to meet the One whose life is cradled within. So too with this beautiful story of Mary and Joseph and angels and shepherds and wise men from the East – it says **the gift**

of Christ comes to each of us no matter our station or lot in life. It says there is for each of us “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” [Luke 2: 11] **And it invites us to model our lives after His** by doing justice, by loving kindness, and by walking humbly with our God.

Oh this Christmas season is a beautiful time of year. As we know it and have experienced it in our lives, it is a time for giving gifts which have been lovingly and carefully wrapped. On Christmas morning, we unwrap them, often with expressions of delight. Some of us will spend a portion of that morning tidying up around the tree, collecting the paper and debris. But for all of us, it's not the wrapping we want; it's the gift within. I invite you to experience it anew with deep and abiding joy. Merry Christmas.