

December 30, 2018

Matthew 2: 13-23

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“The Gift that Doesn’t Fit”

What was the Day After like for you? On the Day After our home was quiet, again. I’m not overstating it to say there was a peacefulness to the place and I took a moment to appreciate the calm as I pushed back in my favorite recliner. Part of me was glad for the breather. Here at the church we completed five Christmas Eve services and then our family followed that with the activities of a full Christmas Day, with lots of gifts and food. Like some of you and your homes, our house was the gathering place, so our kids and their significant others, plus a couple extended family, did what we always do on Christmas Day; we exchanged presents, wore our Christmas pajamas, ate rich food, all the while Christmas songs or Christmas movies played the background. The Day After was nothing like that. The house was quiet, the space under the tree was empty, trash bags were stuffed with torn gift paper and the refrigerator was jammed with leftovers. Everyone was gone. This is why I say there was a peacefulness to the place but I’m not sure that I prefer it that way. In fact, I found myself thinking what usually comes to mind on the Day After, how quickly it’s over and how easily we fall back into life’s regular routine. The news that was reported on the Day After focused on the usual stories. The stock market had its biggest day of the year. The government was still partially shut down with the Washington gridlock solidly in place, the weather still threatened travel plans and the places of conflict in the world before Christmas Day were still places of tension afterward. What’s it been like for you in these days after? Is anything different? Has anything changed? Maybe you saw the story about the son who gave his parents a wonderful Christmas surprise. The young man’s name is Brady Singer. He’s a baseball pitcher and he’s been drafted in the first round by the Kansas City Royals. In an emotional letter he posted on social media, the young man expressed his deep appreciation to his parents for all they had done for him and he wanted to do something for them at Christmas with his new found status. Brady paid off the loan on his parents’ home and all their other debts, too. Clearly things have changed for that mom and dad. It’s a positive human interest story and while we may focus on the financial impact of it all the real difference maker in the Singer family is love. So, what’s changed for us? In the weeks before Christmas the mantra of the church was “Come, Lord Jesus, come.” Well, Christmas Day came and now it’s gone, and in these days after we’re left to reflect on the meaning of it all. We say the gift we receive from God at Christmas is Christ. The difference maker in this story is love, too. So, what do we say in these days after about the impact the coming of Christ makes in our lives?

To help us reflect on the meaning of Christmas on this Sunday after we’ve turned to the Gospel of Matthew, where he presents his unique angle on the impact the coming of Christ makes in the world. First of all, the story Matthew tells is dramatically different from the traditional story of Jesus’ birth we read on Christmas Eve. Think back with me to just days ago. Christians gathered here and in sanctuaries all over the world to read from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. This is the story of Christmas we hear each year because it wouldn’t be Christmas Eve without the Bethlehem manger, and Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds who went to see this thing that had happened. In the beauty of the sanctuary we held the soft light of a candle in our hands and we sang about the silent and holy night when Christ was born. The last line of that beloved carol wraps us in the blessing of Christmas, “sleep in heavenly peace.” This is the story we want to hear every year but on this Sunday after we are reminded that it is not the only story of Christmas in the bible. Matthew’s gospel moves us away from the soft light of a stable and opens our eyes to the reality of the world at the time Jesus was born. In Matthew’s Gospel it’s not a starry night, it’s a scary night. In Matthew’s Gospel it’s not silent and peaceful but threatening and vulnerable. On Christmas Eve we read from Luke and we were comforted by the gentleness of the story of Jesus’ birth. Well, on this Sunday after we read from Matthew and we are invited to reflect on the spiritual confrontation that erupts when God’s presence emerges in our world.

Here’s what I’m saying; Luke tells us the shepherds took notice. Matthew tells us the principalities and powers of the world took notice. This is the key to our understanding on the Sunday after, how Matthew’s Christmas story focuses on a character who has never been a figurine in any manger scene. King Herod; he’s at the center of Matthew’s story. Christ was born in the time of King Herod and there’s nothing that worries a sitting king more than the report that a new king is on the way. And so, in Matthew angels don’t come to sing, soldiers are sent to do Herod’s bidding. In Matthew, there is no silent and holy night, just the cries of mothers for their young children because Herod intends to track down the threat to his throne by eliminating all male babies in the territory. We say the gift we receive from God at Christmas is Christ and in Matthew’s Gospel this gift does not fit with the priorities of a world controlled by the likes of Herod. Since we’ve been going back and forth this morning let’s turn to Christmas Eve and Luke’s story once more. He tells us Mary pondered these things. Maybe this is what she was thinking as she held her child in her arms, how power and control and manipulation and self-centered priorities want

nothing to do with love and grace. God's ways confront the ways of the world. To tell the story of Christ's birth is to find some way to include the likes of Herod. In our world and in our lives there are realities that threaten to cancel out the beautiful thing God has done.

What do we do when the gift doesn't fit? I've noticed over the years a phrase of words that has become solidly part of our Christmas traditions and I'm not talking about the usual greeting, "Merry Christmas." The phrase so much a part of our cultural is, "Do you want a gift receipt with that?" If gifts don't fit or gifts aren't quite right we want to be able to return them. God's love and grace and peace don't seem to fit in this crazy world so is there a return policy we should know about? Of course not. What God gives us in Christ is meant to last. God doesn't offer an exchange. It may seem like the peace of Christ doesn't fit and it may seem like God-centeredness is the underdog to self-centeredness in our world, but Matthew message is called the gospel, good news, for a reason. God's purpose never falters in the long run. Oh, Herod's power is nothing in comparison to Christ. What God does in Jesus will not be denied. The impact of those who represent darkness and pain and death is only temporary. God deals with the Herods of the world and God does not turn away from whatever threatens the love and grace of Christ in our lives.

Ultimately, the gospel on this Sunday after speaks with greatest influence when it connects directly with our lives. The gift of Christ doesn't fit in our world and, as it turns out, this is the greatest gift of all. Christ's love doesn't fit but it never fails. Christ brings an eternal and saving love. So, wherever we may be encouraged to toss love aside, or to categorize people into winners and losers, or to give equal time to those who foster violence and hate, the gift of God's love rescues us from destructive and despairing attitudes. Christ and the peace Christ gives isn't rooted in this world. This peace doesn't fit in a world that urges us to never be satisfied. So, whenever challenges or conflicts ramp up the anxiety in our hearts, that's where God's peace comes to take hold of us. It's a peace that doesn't fit the world's criteria for what should satisfy us but is a peace that will not let us go. God's peace surpasses all the understanding of the world and it wraps us in the blessed assurance of our faith. And finally, the gift God gives is God's presence with us. It's a presence that doesn't fit in a world where we are told we've got to make it on our own or that we've got to just deal with our loneliness and isolation. God says, "I am with you and always will be." God's gifts of love, peace, and presence don't fit in this world and the fact that they don't is why they are the source of our salvation. What God gives keeps working on us, reshaping us, re-creating us, re-defining our lives until we fit perfectly with God's purpose and are formed in a way that is one with God's way. The gift doesn't fit and this is why it creates a new world and new life and new way and new hope in us.

Christmas has come and Christ is born, and on this Sunday after there is no better news than this. This gift isn't just received on a beautifully silent and holy night in late December. This is a gift that is with us always and everywhere and in every moment. Christ was and is and always will be, and there is no King Herod and no threat anywhere or from anyone that will ever get in the way.

Prayer of Response:

God of grace and God of glory, on this Sunday morning after and on this final Sunday of the year, help us renew our commitment to open our hearts to your gift of love. Give us courage to name the areas in our lives where we are anxious or given over to ways of fear. Help us to stop hurting others as a way of protecting ourselves. Help us to let go of the way of Herod, where self is placed in the center and self is the ultimate concern. Make room for the way of Christ. Let love, grace, healing and peace not only fit in some of the places in our lives but make love, grace, healing and peace our entire way of life.

You have given us the gift of Christ and we now give to you our lives. In the blessed name of Jesus we pray.  
Amen.