

**+ John 1:14 + God's Greatest Gift...For You!¹ +
+ Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day + 25 December 2014 +**

"What did you get for Christmas?" It's probably the most common question asked of children on Christmas Day. Most of us have passed the gift opening portion of Christmas and now we get to enjoy the gifts. So what did you get? How do this year's gifts compare to gifts you've received in the past? The reason I ask is because I have a more important question for you to consider—what is the best Christmas gift you have ever received?

Now that's going to vary from person to person depending on how old you are, how many Christmases you've celebrated, and the path your life has taken. Nevertheless, every one of us has at least one gift that sticks out in our minds. Perhaps it was a gift that you received as a child—a game, a toy, a play set, a truck, a gaming system. I remember one Christmas back in grade school when after all the gifts were opened, my parents pulled out two long, slender boxes and handed them to my brother and me. No, they weren't Red Ryder Air Rifle BB guns or toy lightsabers. Instead, they were exactly what two boys who loved baseball had always wanted—black, factory-made Louisville Slugger baseball bats made to our size specifications with our names imprinted on the barrel in silver. They were beautiful.

Perhaps the best gift that comes to your mind is something you received as a grown-up. Maybe it's an engagement ring or a new HD TV or even a car. Perhaps your best gift is in a completely different category—a gift that someone else wouldn't think was all that great, a gift that by all appearances looks quite ordinary, but actually has special meaning.

One year back in high school, my younger brother and I gave our father a brick—a used, beat-up, old brick. It even had a couple chunks of mortar attached so it couldn't sit straight on his shelf. It was probably one of the ugliest, most boring gifts my father has ever received, but to him it was priceless. You see, that brick had come from the auto body shop that his grandfather had built back in the 1920s. He later opened a tavern-restaurant at that location, which my grandparents took over years later. My dad grew up there. Yes, it was an ugly, old, ordinary brick, but for my father it was a priceless piece of his family history, of his home that his grandfather had built.

Two thousand years ago, an extraordinarily ordinary gift was given to our world. It wasn't wrapped with shiny paper or a beautiful bow. In fact, that gift looked like nothing more than an ordinary baby boy. He wasn't shiny or big or impressive. He was pretty ordinary—cute, cuddly, sometimes smelly or loud, definitely helpless. He didn't have wings. He didn't have a special glow about him. He didn't perform miracles with the snap of his fingers as soon as he left his mother's womb. Yet this "ordinary" baby boy was unlike any other baby ever born. The Apostle John tells us, "***The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.***" "***The Word***" is another name for Jesus—the son of Mary and the Son of God. "***The Word***" was God's gift to the world—both true God and true human. He had come to save the world from its sins, but you wouldn't guess that by his ordinary appearance.

By his outward appearance, Jesus certainly didn't look like a newborn king. Now the Lord had made promise after promise to generations of his people to prepare them for Christ's coming, but over time they grew impatient. They gave up on God or reinterpreted the prophecies, thinking that an earthly king would come who would establish a world empire from Jerusalem. He would raise up a mighty army and throw off the Roman tyranny. It's that kind of king that filled Herod the Great with so much fear that he had all the boys two and under around Bethlehem murdered, but God had other plans. This Jesus was going to be a different kind of king.

Now God's gift to the world was also born in awful conditions—in a filthy, smelly stable that was probably not much more than a glorified cave packed with unwashed animals. His parents were poor, so he didn't have fuzzy jammies, only strips of cloth to swaddle him. He didn't have a plush bassinet or clean sheets, only a feed box, where animals eat and leave behind the gunk from their mouths and noses, with a bed of fresh hay. That stable was no place for the birth of a king, but that's where God gave us his gift.

The child was supposed to be God's extraordinary gift to the world, but by all accounts, there was nothing extraordinary, nothing exciting, nothing noteworthy about him. After all, we expect babies to be cute, not glorious, right? In fact, other than his parents the only people who got excited about his birth were a bunch of strange shepherds who wouldn't stop telling people about the message of the angels or the Messiah in the manger. Everyone else in Bethlehem shrugged it off and didn't bother to investigate.

¹ Some of the thoughts of this sermon were received with thanks from a Christmas devotion by Rev. Paul Fries.

You would expect more from a world that was receiving a special gift from God, but they didn't care. John explains earlier in the chapter (1:10-11), **"He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him."** How are we any different? Why should we care that **"the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us"**? Why does it matter that God lowered himself to be born a human being like you and me?

It matters because of what Jesus came to do. You see, in order for us to be saved, God had to fulfill his requirements for us. God set his holy standard of perfection and said, "If you can accomplish this perfectly, you can enter heaven." Yet not a single one of us could do it because every one of us is corrupted with sin. Every one of us has fallen and will fall short of God's holy requirement. On top of all that, we don't just fall short, but we openly rebel against our holy God. We oppose his will, even when you think that the sin you commit isn't that bad or isn't as "serious" as the sins that others do. In God's eyes, however, every sin is serious, and every sin has the same punishment attached—eternal death.

To make matters even worse, Satan—God's enemy and ours—packages temptation and sin in bright, shiny, attractive gift wrapping. He puts the most impressive bow on top and places that lovely gift in your hands. Your sinful nature just wants to tear into it, but what do you find when you open it up? You find emptiness. You find despair. You find guilt, and you find death every time you open one of those bright, shiny "gifts" from Satan.

That's why God had to give us his special gift. His glorious and undeserved love just couldn't bear watching us give in to temptation and fall prey to sin, Satan, and death over and over again. So he gave us an extraordinarily ordinary-looking gift to rescue us. God didn't get rid of the Law. He had Jesus fulfill it in your place. God didn't get rid of his holy standard. He had Jesus exceed that standard for you. St. Paul tells us, **"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under Law that we might have the full rights of sons."** (Galatians 4:4-5)

God didn't punish us as our sins deserve, but instead he took the curse of sin and that awful "gift" of death and punished Jesus with all the fury of his holy condemnation. As ordinary as that Child looks in the manger, the cross looms behind it, for this Child has come to die...for you, in your place, as the sacrifice, the ransom price for your sins to rescue you—and that's glorious! John tells us, **"We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."**

Jesus takes away that shiny, awful gift of death that Satan so gleefully gave you, and he places in your hands an ordinary-looking gift that is greater, more special, more priceless, more meaningful, and more lasting than any other gift you have or ever will receive. He gives you what comes purely because of his glorious and undeserved grace, and unlike Satan's gifts, it's real. It's your salvation purchased and won with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death. He gives you himself—God's greatest gift—and with him comes countless other gifts from God—forgiveness for your guilt, peace for your troubled heart, comfort for your grieving soul, strength for your weak faith, joy for your sorrow, and eternity with him.

In the end, the best gift you have ever received isn't wrapped up in the shiniest paper. No, this Gift is wrapped up in human flesh, and is even given to you with bread and wine. It doesn't cost you any money, but it cost our God everything. It's not going to break or fall apart or go missing, but it lasts for all eternity. This Gift from God simply takes your breath away. **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth."** My friends, this Gift, this Child, this Savior is the best gift you'll ever get, because he is God's greatest gift...for you! God bless you in the days ahead as you celebrate this precious gift that God gave to you. Amen.