

The Greatest Gift

Colossians 1: 15-20

Christmas Morning

12 25 2011 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell the story of Jesus' life; yet the four Gospel writers tell the story each in his own way. **Mark** fast forwards thirty years to John the Baptist. In the ninth verse of the first chapter, he plunges immediately into Jesus' public ministry. **John** takes a more poetic approach to Jesus' incarnation, writing: "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*"

Only Matthew and Luke discuss Jesus' birth and infancy. And even they differ in the details. **Matthew** focuses upon Joseph and includes the story of the wisemen's journey. **Luke** concentrates on Mary's role and describes the shepherds' visit.

Together Matthew and Luke tell the well-known story of the **first Christmas**. Even non-churched people know the main points of the tale: Mary and Joseph, angelic visitations, Caesar's census, the journey to Bethlehem, no room in the inn, the virgin birth, a manger for a crib, the angelic chorus, shepherds, yonder star, and gift-bearing wisemen. On this most holy of days, we have rehearsed the Christmas story with lessons and carols.

I. Luke 15

Yet the Scripture passage I want to talk about for today's sermon is not found in any of the traditional readings for Christmas. Instead, the text comes from the **fifteenth chapter of Luke**. This passage is set thirty plus years AFTER the birth of Jesus.

In the midst of his public ministry, Jesus attracted a wide assortment of followers. Even tax collectors and other "sinners" gathered to hear him. The religious leaders were scandalized, and muttered, "*This man welcomes sinners and even eats with them!*"

In response to their accusations, Jesus told three parables about being **lost and found**:

- ❖ A shepherd had a flock of 100 sheep and one became lost. He left the 99 behind to find the missing sheep.
- ❖ A woman had ten silver coins and one rolled away. She searched the house carefully until she found it.
- ❖ A man had two sons. When the younger son ran away from home, the father anxiously awaited his child's return.

No doubt by now you are confused. This is **Christmas Day**. Luke 15 contains no nativity scene with a baby Jesus laying in a manger and surrounded by Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, wisemen, assorted barnyard animals, the little drummer boy, Santa Claus, and Frosty the Snowman. However, the three parables from Luke 15 reveal the **heart** of the Christmas message.

Believe it or not, it turns out that the Lord God Almighty, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, is head-over-heels in love with his creation. Even in our willful sinfulness, God constantly seeks his lost children. Our Lord will stop at nothing to win us back. The ultimate proof God's love begins in the manger and continues at the cross and empty tomb.

Although John 3: 16 is not considered a part of the Christmas story either, the verse summarizes the Gospel in a nutshell: *“For God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son. Whoever believes in him should not perish but inherit everlasting life.”*

Our Lord is the Good Shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine behind to search for the one last sheep. Our God is like a woman who frantically turns her house upside down until the one lost coin is found. Our Heavenly Father is a loving parent anxiously awaiting to welcome prodigal sons and daughters back home.

One of the church fathers said: *“God became what we are so that we might become what he is.”* The light shines in the darkness, and we are invited to warm ourselves by the Christmas glow.

II. A Christmas Parable

One of Jesus' favorite teaching methods was the use of parables. These earthly stories with heavenly meanings have a way of slipping under our defenses. We do not interpret the parables as much as they interpret our lives. Today as we celebrate Christmas, I would invite you to hear the “old, old story” in a new, different way.

Once upon a time a man was decorating his home for Christmas. The man—being a man—required close supervision for any endeavor combining the words “decorating” and “home.” Fortunately, the queen of the manor took great delight in such matters. She gladly volunteered to oversee his efforts.

Numerous pilgrimages were made to far off lands named “Attic” and “Closet.” He returned with boxes of Christmas past, trailing the exotic aromas of evergreen, cardboard, and dust. Stockings were hung by the chimney with care. Ceramic Santas shared the mantle with a nativity scene. Artificial wreaths with fresh bows garlanded the doors and windows.

Finally a coffin-sized box came thumpity, thump, thumping down the stairs. It contained the dismembered limbs of a fake fir. Working from the bottom up, the man painstakingly inserted each branch into its proper place. Soon an artificial, eight feet tall Christmas tree graced the room.

While his better half organized ornaments, the man attacked a mare's nest of tangled lights. A series of exclamations not in keeping with the holiday season soon followed! He angrily slammed the lights on the floor, and several shattered into glass shrapnel. Grabbing car keys and wallet, he journeyed to a distant emporium and purchased ten new strings with one hundred lights each.

The man wrapped the one thousand light bulbs around the fir's branches. Extension cords stretched to every available outlet. When he finally finished, the entire family gathered for the lighting of the great tree. “Oohs” and “ahhs” greeted the glorious advent.

The husband/father settled into an easy chair with a double shot of eggnog. His wife banished the children and spent three hours placing the ornaments just so on each limb. Then they all stood arm-in-arm surveying the golden glow of the Christmas tree.

That's when he saw IT. One string at the tip-top of the tree was dark. One hundred lights were not burning! The man frantically checked and rechecked plugs and fuses. He finally had to admit the obvious: one bulb must be burnt out. His spouse chose this moment to ask if he had checked the lights before putting them on the tree. Seeing the look in his eye, she quickly retreated from the room.

Light by light, the man wearily checked each bulb. One, two, three Midnight came and went, but he remained faithful to his task. Ninety-eight, ninety-nine Of course it was the final bulb that proved to be the problem.

But, oh, what a wondrous sight when the string finally came to life! All the hard labor and heartbreak were forgotten. He stood basking in the warm, Christmas light. Then he awoke his wife and children and cried out, "Rejoice with me; I have found my burnt out light!" The family celebrated with a bottle of eggnog and a plate of Christmas cookies.

The kingdom of God is like unto a man decorating his Christmas tree with lights. And I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents of the darkness than over ninety-nine righteous persons who already live in the light. (Luke 15: 1-7)

Get Found, Kid!

In his book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum wrote about a scene in his neighborhood (pp. 56-58):

In the early dry dark of an October's Saturday evening, the neighborhood children are playing hide-and-seek. How long since I played hide-and-seek? Thirty years; maybe more. I remember how. I could become part of the game in a moment, if invited. Adults don't play hide-and-seek. Not for fun, any way. Too bad . . .

As I write this, the neighborhood game goes on, and there is a kid under a pile of leaves in the yard just under my window. He has been there a long time now, and everybody else is found and they are about to give up on him over at the base. I considered going out to the base and telling them where he is hiding. And I thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive him out. Finally, I just yelled, "GET FOUND, KID!" out the window. And scare him so bad he probably wet his pants and started crying and ran home to tell his mother. It's real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes

"Olly-olly-oxen-free." The kids out in the street are hollwering the cry that says "Come on in, wherever you are. It's a new game" And so say I. To all those who have hid too good. *Get found, kid!* Olly-olly-oxen-free.

Conclusion

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all tell the story of Jesus' life. However, this morning we are invited to make the Christmas story OUR story. It is a story of God's light that shines in the darkness, of divine life in the midst of human death, of the Lord's forgiveness for our sin, and heavenly grace for our lives. It is THE story of being lost . . . and allowing our heavenly Father to find us.

Olly-olly-oxen-free. It's a new game—GET FOUND, KID!

Amen.