

The Gift that Keeps on Giving

John 1:1-14 (from "The Message") The Word was first, the Word present to God, God present to the Word. The Word was God. Everything was created through him; nothing — not one thing! — came into being without him. What came into existence was Life, and the Life was Light to live by. The Life-Light blazed out of the darkness; the darkness couldn't put it out.

There was once a man, his name, John, sent by God to point out the way to the Life-Light. He came to show everyone where to look, who to believe in. John was not himself the Light; he was there to show the way to the Light.

The Life-Light was the real thing: Every person entering Life he brings into Light. He was in the world, and the world was there through him, and the world didn't even notice. He came to his own people, but they didn't want him. But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. These are the God-begotten. Not blood-begotten. Not flesh-begotten. Not sex-begotten.

The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one of a kind glory. Like Father, like Son, generous inside and out, true from start to finish.

Many years ago, a person I know got engaged on Christmas Eve. Her fiancé gave her a huge box. On the front of the box was a picture of the place where they first met. He told her it was a gift to meet her. And just meeting her would have been enough.

She unwrapped it, and inside found another box that needed to be unwrapped. On the front of this box was a picture of the place they had their first date. It was a gift to date you, he wrote. And just to date you would have been enough. And inside that one, another one, and inside

that one, another. There were things like the place of their first kiss, when he met her family, and stuff like that. I don't remember how many boxes she unwrapped when she finally got to the small jewelry box containing a diamond ring with a note, "Will You Marry Me?"

We heard the Luke versions of the Christmas story tonight. Thanks to Evan and Jeannette for reading it.

The verses I read from John are like John's version of the Christmas story, too. In John's Gospel, we don't read about Bethlehem and shepherds and wise men and stars. We get more mystic poetry. But we do learn about Jesus and his mission here on earth and where he was before he was born on earth.

But Wait: There's Much, Much More!

This first chapter of John sort of reminds me of the gift the woman I knew got on the night of her engagement. It starts out with one idea, one gift about who Jesus is, and then as we keep reading we find out there is more and more and more. Each would've been enough, but we get more! John calls Jesus "The Word." There's a whole sermon on why that is so, which I won't go into tonight, but trust me: "The Word" here is Jesus.

So, we have a gift for us today. (Pastor Hartzell pulls out a big gift box.) And the first thing we learn about this gift of Jesus, the Word, is that He was with God in the beginning. Jesus, along with God, is our creator. All things were made by him, the text says — that is, you and me and every human being on this planet. We are all created by God.

What a wonderful gift in and of itself: to be created.

And then, as we read on in John, we receive another gift. (Pastor Hartzell opens a gift box to find another box inside.) The text says, "In Him was LIFE."

We were all woken up this morning with breath in our lungs and a chance to experience another day. Stop and think a minute what an incredible gift that is. So, we are created and we are given the gift of life by God and through this Jesus.

But there is more. (Pastor Hartzell opens a gift box to find another box inside.) And then we are told that this life God gives us is LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS. You see, there was a lot of pain and hardship in the world. A lot of people hurting each other. There were days when these people God created passed on more darkness and hatred and selfishness and evil than they did light and life.

We know about this kind of evil — especially this year — a long, hot summer with hate crimes on the rise, mass shootings in Orlando, Dallas and multiple other places, the division in our nation made even deeper in this last election, the terrible incident in the Berlin Christmas market this week, children starving or being abused. And in our own lives: We know darkness, don't we? Worries about those we love and our future? For many of us Christmas is a time when we keenly feel the losses in our lives. Darkness can fill our Christmastime.

Nothing Can Extinguish This Light

According to this passage, Jesus came into the world to bring light in to the dark places. He showed up in the lowliest of places, when the politics of the day were dominated by unjust Roman rulers. He was born to a poor, unmarried teenager and a simple working class man. The pregnancy itself was a scandal. The child was born in a stinky barn. He was born smack dab into the middle of pain and darkness — but also much wonder.

So, we not only have creation and the gift of life, we are given LIGHT for the darkness of our lives and world. The LIGHT of HOPE that, no matter what happens in our lives and world, this Jesus is coming to help us out. That no matter what injustice or situation arises, there will be some light at the end of the tunnel because of Jesus' love. LIGHT that even when evil seems to have the final word, we have HOPE because we know there is a light that has come that is kind

of like one of those magic birthday candles: No matter how hard we try to blow it out, it still keeps glowing, because nothing can extinguish God's love. Nothing.

Now that would be enough, wouldn't it? To be created, to be given life, to be given light and hope for the darkest places of our lives. Not only are we created. Not only are we given this gift we call LIFE. Not only are we given LIGHT for the darkness. All that would've been enough, but there is more. (Pastor Hartzell opens a box to find another box!)

This Word, this Jesus wants us to become our true selves, and he comes and moves into our neighborhood! Notice it doesn't say, this Jesus would only come and live among those people that had their act together. Or this Jesus would only come and live with people who were happy or had money. Or this Jesus would only come and live among those people who behave well all the time.

No, this Jesus, this Word of God, this Gift is called the Incarnation, and this Jesus moves into OUR neighborhoods — when we are good and when we are bad. When we get it right and when we get it wrong. When we believe and when we doubt.

This Jesus wants to live with us, day in and day out.

The Gift is Our Choice

And our invitation on this Christmas Eve is to receive this gift once again — for the first time or the umpteenth time. God doesn't force us to receive this gift. This text from John tells us that he came to his own, and even many of his own couldn't see the gift, couldn't receive him. God won't force this on anyone, any more than anyone will force you to open anything under your tree in the morning.

But it is being offered. Creation. Life breath. Light in our darkness. The chance to become our truest selves. And God with us in Jesus, in our neighborhood.

This is the gift we keep opening up, and the deeper we go inside, we find — ah! — there is even more. More love than we can imagine. More hope in our darkness than we could ever conceive. More courage to help us live in a confusing world where evil often seems to have the final word.

Why would Jesus come and continue to keep on giving to us, to keep on trying to show us who God is and how God feels about us?

Because of LOVE, my friends. Because this child is what love looks like. So, in this box there is not an engagement ring, but some words: Let me read them to you:

Dear men and women and youth and children,

Merry Christmas.

I'm here.

The world is a tough place,

I love you.

Do not be afraid.

Amen.