

When you were growing up do you remember the famous song, “All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth?” Although it has been a while since I have heard it sung, the other day I began to sing it because our grandson Asher just lost his bottom two front teeth. Of course, as a Pastor and follower of Christ, my one wish, and biggest hope, is for Asher to want Jesus as his gift ahead of teeth or toys or candy. After all, isn’t that the message we typically hear over and over again during the Holiday Season, or at least something similar? “Jesus is the reason for the season, the baby Jesus is the most precious gift we can ever receive, God gave us the best present ever and it was gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a manger.”

So...what is it that you are hoping to receive during this extraordinary time of year? What have you written down on your letters to Santa, or what have you been asking for in your prayers lately that you just can’t live without? Perhaps your greatest desire for Christmas is to spend some quality time with loved ones that you haven’t seen in a while? Maybe you are hoping for a certain diagnosis from the doctors who are treating someone you care deeply about? Perhaps all you really want is to have some time to rest, recuperate, and relax after all of your Holiday preparations of cooking, decorating, shopping, and gift wrapping? And maybe, just maybe you won’t sleep very well tonight, because there is a certain gift that you anticipate receiving that you have been dying to play with.

Of course, Christmas is more about giving, than receiving, and I know that many of us in worship tonight are eager to watch our loved ones open up their presents on Christmas morning so we can see the look of wonder and delight on their faces. But I’m willing to bet at least a few of us are also looking forward to tearing open some packages as well. After all, there are a lot of really cool and exciting gifts to be had. Let me share just a few of the Top Christmas presents I found listed on a website called [buzzfeed.com](https://www.buzzfeed.com).

Let’s see, apparently the number 1 gift of 2021 is a mystical colorant you can purchase that can transform your loved one’s fireplace into one seemingly filled with magic and dancing colors. Then there is the Book with No Pictures by the Office’s own B.J Novak that’ll leave you and your mini-me giggling past their bedtime. Or how about a Baby Yoda night light that, for a lack of a better term, can become their guiding light as they make their way through the hallway in the middle of the night when they’ll inevitably need to tinkle. And if you are looking for something cute and fun to put in your loved one’s stocking you can always get them a smore’s-

themed Chapstick collection that'll keep their pout super soft and give you an extra reason to give them some sugar.

Of course, there will always be something out there that we want, something that we desire, but I wonder as we explore our Gospel story if we will discover something else, something that we just can't live without! Tonight, as we celebrate the mysterious and wondrous birth of the Christ child, as we explore the implications of God's most beloved gift to the world, perhaps we will come to the realization that Jesus is the absolute, must have present of the year, of our very lives!

As we unwrap Matthew's message, we will uncover all kinds of clues that point us to this reality. In fact, even as events begin to unfold in our story, we find that things aren't always what they seem. If you know anything about the man who established the decree of a world registration, you may be aware that Augustus is remembered as the founder of the empire that brought peace to the world. Apparently, there is an ancient inscription that hails him as, "the savior of the world?" Yet, things aren't always what they appear to be. Little did the engraver of that quote realize that the emperor's actions would play a part in the birth of the real savior of the world. By issuing the decree for a census he was serving God's plan by guiding Jesus' parents to Bethlehem where scripture had foretold the Messiah would be born.

As the story continues it is easily understandable why Joseph would need to go to his home town to register, but we may question his decision to take Mary with him on such a long journey. Shouldn't she be home with her family on bed rest? Is it wise for her to ride a donkey for several days on a trip that was over seventy miles when she was so far along in her pregnancy? Not only was travel dangerous back then, but it isn't hard for us to imagine that people in those days may not have been so quick to accept an engaged woman expecting a child. Perhaps that is just one reason Mary and Joseph found it difficult to find lodging when they arrived in Bethlehem.

Again, sometimes things aren't always what they seem, and we have to be open to different possibilities! Perhaps you recall the story of Joseph receiving an angelic messenger that revealed to him the importance of the precious gift that Mary was carrying inside of her belly. That visit helped him realize that God's son, the Messiah, the one scripture had foretold would save humanity from sin and death, would be resting inside the womb of his betrothed. Is it any wonder than that Joseph would want to keep such a watchful eye on Mary, or that he couldn't

bear to have her out of his site? Another possibility to consider is that because she is so far along in her pregnancy, he wouldn't want to miss the birth. After all, most fathers want to be present during the miracle of their child being born and Joseph' was expecting an even greater miracle, for he knew that God's son was about to enter into the world!

Often times I think we know this story so well, that we forget how incredible and astounding it truly was for this historical event to have taken place at all. Yet, sometimes things that are familiar to us can continue to astound us, if we let them! Think about it, the God who created us and gave us life, became fully human! He took on our flesh and our blood and then he was willing to experience everything we go through in life from birth to death! That is a gift that is beyond measure, a gift that is irreplaceable, a gift that is priceless!

As I was reflecting on today's story, as I opened myself up to new ways of looking at it, I noticed words and imagery that go along with this idea. Although Emperor Augustus had a different reason for having the whole world be registered, perhaps Jesus command at the end of his ministry for the disciples to baptize all nations is a reminder that we all need to place Jesus on our gift registry? Notice also that the package Mary was to deliver was on time and it was transported to the right place in Bethlehem, where God had promised the Messiah would be born. Then after the birth of the Christ child he is even gift wrapped in bands of cloth. True this was most likely done to keep his limbs straight so they would grow properly, but it was also done so that later the shepherds would recognize him.

Now, outside of a man taking his pregnant fiancé on a long Journey, and the divine son of God being born in a stable of all places, the fact that shepherds were the very first visitors to the manger to see the Good news of great joy that the Angel had announced to them, is the final clue for us that things aren't always what they appear to be! Shepherds aren't the type of people whom we would initially expect to be first in line to worship Jesus. They weren't religious leaders, or even devout Jews, for their jobs kept them from attending Temple worship services. They didn't practice Sabbath day observances; they were seen as ignorant, immoral, crude, dirty, and even vulgar individuals. And yet, the shepherds take the Angels message to heart, they go to see what has happened, and they even provide comfort to Mary by telling her what they had witnessed while they were watching over their flocks that night. Although she may not have understood everything that was taking place, hearing news of Angelic visitors may have provided her with some additional encouragement.

The Shepherds are a reminder that even though we may at times consider ourselves unworthy to come to Jesus, we are all invited to enjoy God's gift to the world. They represent all people, and are a reminder that it is only by God's invitation that we come to him, that we know about him, that we are able to believe in Jesus as our Savior. We deserve nothing that God has given us; but God has been and continues to be good to us. All God asks of us, is for us to be willing to allow him to transform us so that we can learn to love him, to trust him, and so that we can learn to love one another in return!

Unfortunately, the society in which we live has a way of making us believe that there is always something else out there that we just can't live without! Over the years manufacturers have found ways to try and trick us into thinking that there are certain items that we absolutely, positively, must have! I'm not a kid anymore, but I can still remember the days of cabbage patch kids, Tickle me Elmo, Furbies, and I will never forget years and years ago when it was almost impossible to find a Nintendo Wii! And what happens to these must have items? They break, we outgrow them, they end up at good will, a garage sale, or they sit somewhere gathering dust!

This year I haven't been able to figure out what the most sought after present is, but I have discovered one that no one should ever live without! Thankfully, tonight we are given the opportunity to make Christ the ultimate gift of our lives! He is a gift that will continue to provide for us day after day, a gift that is always there for us, and he is the only gift in life that can truly save us! This year let us not only accept this amazing and miraculous present given to us by God, but let us give him to others as well. Amen.