

Christmas Gift

Christmas is the celebration of giving. Some 20 years ago, I wrote the following. It goes like this.

Deep down in the land where “hog-killing time” comes just “fore Christmas” – (the land of scrub pines and red clay hills and orange Nehi signs – and if you don’t know where that is, I won’t tell you). Deep down in the land I came from there used to be a custom – kept over from slavery days – that was still going strong when I was a little boy – and nothing in this wide, wide world puts Christmas in my heart so much as the memory of it – even though it was such a simple thing. It was a sort of game, which some of you may have played, and it was called “saying ‘Christmas gift!’.” The servants, the old folks and the chillun especially enjoyed it, and here’s the way you played it: if you could say “Christmas gift!” first to someone on Christmas day ‘fore they could say it to you, they had to give you a present.

I can never remember a single Christmas morning at home when I wasn’t awakened to the sound of someone shouting, “Christmas gift! Christmas gift!” Being myself a sleepy-head, I was usually caught, and never once did I ever beat the old cook to it. For Mattie (that was her name), Mattie took great pride in winning every time, especially in catching my mother and grandmother.

I can hear her joy now – as she slipped up on the family and sticking her wooly head in the room – surprised us with shouts of “Christmas gift, Miss Sally! I catch you! Christmas gift, Mr. John! I surprise you! Christmas gift, Miss Louise! I see you first! Christmas gift, Billy boy! Law, he still ‘sleep in bed!’” And, thus, one by one, she gathered up her presents and bore them off triumphantly ... but not before giving each of us something special from her hand.

And now? Mattie is gone – I know not where – dead, I think – and the happy old custom of calling “Christmas gift!” is, I suppose, gone too.

But I would like to suggest, in all reverence, that in order to awaken the spirit of Christmas, that we play the old time game of “Christmas gift” this year, not just with one another, but that we play it with God. And here is what I mean:

I. In the first place, early on Christmas morning, I don't think it would hurt us, and it might do us a lot of good, to venture to say, quite reverently, to the Almighty God, "Christmas gift, oh, my Lord, Christmas gift! Do you have a gift for me?"

And he, being the generous, kind God he will ever be, he will not disappoint us. For long ago, he gave. He gave himself, didn't he, to some plain shepherds and some wise men – and if we only ask him, you know what? He'll do it again. And how our world needs the gift of him – needs the gift of his faith and the gift of his hope and his love.

Faith? and hope? and love? Lord God, how else can you come by them in this great, clanking machine we live in? Buy them? With money? Some think so. But no. No shopping center sells faith and hope and love. Discover them, then – with the mind? No again. No university has them in the curriculum. Not one. How then? How come faith and hope and love?

It's so simple, few believe it. Why, we just receive them, that's how – as a gift – a gift from God. God's "Christmas gift" to you and me – only ask him; they are free!

Just say to him on Christmas morning, ever so timidly, like a servant come in at the back door, "Christmas gift? O my Lord? Christmas gift, for me?"

Go ahead, don't be too afraid; just ask him, and he'll give himself to you – you'll see.

He'll come into your heart on Christmas Day. As quiet and gentle as he came to Bethlehem long ago – he'll come to you. And he'll give you faith – faith like the shepherds, and he'll give you hope – hope like the wise men, and above all, he'll give you love – love like that of Mary and Joseph – whose newborn child, kicking in the manger, made even a stable seem warm and clean and sweet.

So if you say, "I can't get the Christmas spirit this year" – it may be the trouble is, you haven't yet asked God for it. Maybe you need to sit down quietly under your lighted Christmas tree, take one of the children or the grandchildren on your knee, and read him the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke – read it and sit awhile and think about it. And it may be, then, you too will feel joy that Jesus came into the world, and his presence will be real to you.

"Christmas gift for me? O God?" Just ask him that, and you'll see – I can almost guarantee, he'll give himself to you...

II. But, if we are really going to awaken to the true spirit of Christmas this year, then we are going to have to do more than receive God's gift from him – the gift of himself in Christ –

with the faith and hope and love he brings with him. The old game of “Christmas gift” always works both ways.

So secondly, it may well be, that if we listen carefully, we can hear God say to us, “Christmas gift for me, my child? Christmas gift! What do you have for me?” And that really wakes us up. That God can give to us, we all know, but what can we give to God? On Christmas? What can mortal man bring to the God who has everything?

Wrote Christina Rossetti in the 1800’s:

“What can I give Him
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd,
I would give Him a lamb,
If I were a wise man,
I would do my part,
But what can I give Him,
Give my heart.”

And that’s what you and I can give to God this year for his “Christmas gift.” We can give him our hearts. And Christ himself has told us how: “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”

That’s it, we give God our hearts when we give them away to others, when we share with others the faith and hope and love he gives to us.

If we want to be as generous to God this year – as he’s been to us – then let us be generous to others. Giving from the heart, with affection, in warm appreciation, or especially, out of a sense of another’s need, can be like a magi’s gift to God himself.

Wrote Peter Marshall: “Let’s not give way to cynicism and mutter that ‘Christmas has become commercialized.’ It never will be ...” And he’s right – you can not commercialize the Christmas spirit of generosity. That’s only the cant of the stingy who don’t want to give.

Helen Keller, God bless her, who saw so much more than most, wrote in her little book, The Open Door: “Blessed by the Christmas sunshine, our natures, perhaps long leafless, bring forth new love, new kindness, new mercy, new compassion.” Love, kindness, mercy, compassion – what fine gifts these are for God when we give them to others. And the cost? Only thoughtfulness and a little time.

You know, there are a lot of people in this world – who don't know – how much we think of them, how we appreciate them, how we need them – who don't know how we love them. And why? Because we've never told them. We think they know, but we're just too timid to tell them so.

For years, we've kept our kind thoughts to ourselves. So this Christmas, break the silence barrier – speak out – appreciation and affection. Words like, "I'm so proud of you"; "I need you"; "How kind you are"; "You're lovely"; "Things are better when you're here"; "Thank you so much"; "I love you."

Why, words like these – to those who deserve them and need them – are like gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh – put right into the hands of God.

So, this Christmas, if you want to give God a gift – forgive an old enemy; make a new friend; trust again, don't be suspicious, invite someone who's lonely in. Wrap a gift, send a check – for someone who really needs it. Listen to the old, laugh with the young; don't be too harsh – too critical – be open and loyal and kind – that your soul may not grow thin.

"Christmas gift?" For God? What better things than these can man bring to Christ the King?

"Merry Christmas!"

December 18, 1960

1966 Law Dames at Hill House in Durham

1972 @ and Talk Club; 150, supper