

December 19, 2010
4th Sunday of Advent

1 Samuel 15:10-12, 22-23
Isaiah 35:1-10

“What does Jesus want for Christmas?”

We’re deep into Advent now. Our preparations for Christmas are well underway. If we still have gifts to buy, we may be getting a little pressure from loved ones! I know my oldest grandson is quite worried about the fact that, although they have a tree and decorations in place, there are still no wrapped packages under his tree. He even asked if he could take some that are under my tree and move them to his house until Christmas! To which I replied, I hope lovingly, “No.”

We do get focused on gifts and gift lists. Some of us have a terrible time coming up with a list of things we want. Others can’t stop bubbling over with recitations of things they’d like to receive. Kids have to learn as they grow to make realistic lists. And grownups, if we look deep into our hearts, have wishes that probably can’t be wrapped and placed under a tree—things like: “I wish everyone would pick up after themselves around the house”, or “I wish I could get a job that would pay what we need to live comfortably”, or “I wish I could find a job”, or “I wish my sisters would stop fighting and learn to get along”, or “I wish the world would become a kinder, gentler place”.

In the midst of all our longings, wishing, wanting, list-making, there is something the Advent season calls us to do. We don’t do this, and it’s important. We need to ask, “What does JESUS want from me this Christmas?” You’ve heard it, many times, “We need to put CHRIST back in CHRISTMAS.” It’s true. We do.

The gifts we give arise from the joy within us about the gift WE have received in Jesus Christ. God gives us himself. God comes into this world, even into barns where animal smells pervade the air.

We’re called to open our hearts, to receive the gift of God’s life in our lives. But we need to move on from there. We need to remember that the baby grew up and was, miraculously, the Word of God; God’s message to us carried in one human life. We are people who have promised to serve this Christ. We need to turn to Jesus and ask, “Lord, what do YOU want from me for Christmas?”

Our text from Isaiah actually gives us a list. This Old Testament prophet proclaims what the Messiah wants, what the Messiah will bring about. When we wonder what Jesus wants for Christmas, we can look at this list, for we believe Jesus is the Messiah. Consider what it tells us. The Messiah says:

*I want feeble hands to be strengthened; weak knees to be steadied;
I want God to come and save you;
I want the eyes of the blind to be opened;
I want the ears of the deaf unstopped;
I want water to flow in the desert; to soften the wilderness;
I want people to be safe from predators;
I want joy to crown the heads of my people;
I want sorrow and sighing to flee away;
I want to bring the desert to life.*

In commentator Leonard Sweet's words, "The miracles accompanying Christ's birth are not pretty twinkling lights and stacks of glitzy gifts. The miracles of Christmas are the tough, demanding miracles of a wilderness given bloom, the blind given sight, the deaf given hearing, the lame given wholeness and the mute singing with joy."

Jesus, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, wants to bring the desert to life. Our gift to Jesus, this Christmas, is to be gardeners alongside him—helping with planting, nurturing, watering, weeding and harvesting.

Many Christians make special offerings to churches and charities at Christmas. We often think of this giving as "a nice thing to do". Friends, this is not just a nice thing to do at Christmas; it's a necessary thing to do if we truly intend to follow Jesus. If we are to celebrate Christ's coming in ways that are in keeping with his birth, we MUST ask, "What does Jesus want FROM ME for Christmas this year?"

It might be an offering to an agency that is helping to irrigate and cultivate growth in the deserts of our world. Other agencies bring clean water to places that need it. We can give to the United Methodist Committee on Relief, which is, as our District Superintendent told us at the Church Conference, on the spot in natural disasters immediately, the SECOND to arrive, after the Red Cross. We can give to Heifer Project, which provides animals to persons around the world, giving them a livelihood. We can give

to local groups like Lazarus House, our 24 hour homeless shelter in St. Charles.

Keep in mind, this offering does not need to be money. It can be—money is needed, of course, but you can offer volunteer time and work as well.

Jesus may call you to help water the desert by changing the way you relate to friends at school, to family members, to co-workers or clients. It may be time to let go of old hurts and resentments; it may be time to give more time to your children, aging parents, a friend in need of a friend.

Put on your gardening clothes, friends. Pray. Ask Jesus to guide you. You WILL be given direction, IF YOU ASK! Jesus will show you where you can loosen soil, plant seeds, cultivate, or even harvest. The desert will be brought to life. That's a promise from God's Word. And God's plan includes US rolling up our sleeves to join Jesus in that miracle.

I will continue with this theme next Sunday, which will be the day after Christmas. To get us started, two things are essential for us in order to garden with Jesus:

- Lay down your burdens.
- Surrender your will to God.

Quickly and easily stated, but not so easy to do!

But if we don't lay down our burdens, we have no energy or free hands to work at gardening!

Richard J. Leider, author of *Repacking Your Bags: Lighten Your Load For the Rest of Your Life*, tells of experiencing a “blinding glimpse of the obvious” while leading a backpacking safari in East Africa. “I had a state-of-the-art backpack loaded with every gadget imaginable. My group was accompanied by a Masai chief who carried a knife and a stick only. At the end of the day, I was exhausted while the chief was fresh as a daisy. He asked me to show him what was in my pack, and as I did, explaining why each component was crucial, of course, he asked, ‘But does all of this make you happy?’ I ended leaving about half of my stuff in the Masai village. Actually, I could have left more.”

Put on your gardening clothes. Roll up your sleeves. Get rid of the stuff you're dragging around that you don't need.

Next, surrender your will to God. We trample, rather than cultivate, when we do not have God as our guide. God is a better gardener than we are. Hanging on to doing things OUR way is not going to work.

The writings of E. Stanley Jones, the great missionary to India, are permeated with the subject of surrender. At one place he writes, "What happens to the self when surrendered to God? Does God wipe it out, or wipe it clean?" He goes on to answer, "He wipes it clean of selfishness. The very act of self-surrender gives God the opportunity to cleanse us from selfishness with our consent and co-operation. Having cleansed us of our central selfishness, God gives the self back to self."

Jones continues, "It is a paradox, but you are never so much your own as when you are most his. Bound to him, you walk the earth free. Though at his feet, you stand straight before everything else. You suddenly realize that you have aligned yourself with the creative forces of the universe, so that you are free. Free to create. Free to love. Free to live. Free to live at your maximum. Free to be. Free to be all he wills you to be."

In the Grand Sweep this past week we read about Saul, the first King of Israel. It is a tragic story. Saul moved from humility and obedience to God to rebellion and arrogance. He lost his ability to surrender his will to God, which led to disaster.

We are drawing close to Christmas. In these days we have left, prayerfully consider laying down your burdens and surrendering your will to God. May you find great joy in each day. May we all find that, even in the cold of winter, this is a great time to garden. May God's Holy Spirit show us where to begin. Amen.