

December 26, 2010  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas

1 Samuel 25:23-25. 32-35  
Luke 2:8-11  
Matthew 2:1-1

“Jesus wants YOU for Christmas”

Last Sunday we considered the question, “What does JESUS want for Christmas?” We found in Isaiah 35:1-10 a “wish list” for the Messiah. This list is a poetic recitation of all suffering being turned to joy, of all that is barren and dry turning into a blooming garden. I shared my conclusion that what Jesus wants for Christmas is to bring the desert to life! And he wants us to put on our gardening clothes to work alongside him. IF WE ASK, Jesus will show us where to till soil, to plant seeds, to cultivate, pull weeds and even to harvest.

In order to garden with Jesus, we were challenged to consider two first steps: First, give your burdens to God. We can't garden carrying a heavy load. The load can include physical material items, money, old resentments and hurts. Lay them down, give them away, share with others. The second step was to surrender our wills to God's will. God is a better gardener than we are. We trample fragile new growth with our muddy boots, if we insist on tromping around without any guidance.

Today we take another step. What does Jesus want for Christmas? Yes, he wants you to lay down your bundles of baggage you lug with you everywhere. Yes, he wants you to surrender your will to his own, so you can be a help rather than a hindrance in the garden. But there is more.

What Jesus really wants for Christmas is YOU. At Christmas God gave us his very being made flesh. This Christmas, give Jesus the gift of all you are.

A story, told by Norman Wahl, a Lutheran pastor from Minnesota, may help us ponder and receive God's gift:

*A woman and her son prepared to set off for the 11 p.m. Christmas Eve worship at their church. The husband, as usual, decided that he would stay home, sit in his easy chair, and enjoy the evening unencumbered by “church stuff”. As he watched his family leave in the car, he could see that it was starting to snow.*

*While reading the newspaper, the man thought he heard knocking at the window, but then decided he was hearing things. But the knocking continued, and then he heard pecking.*

*Opening the curtains, he saw the snow had intensified and the wind had picked up. Then he saw a bird, no, a whole flock of birds, on his lawn. A few had flown into his window, perhaps seeking shelter from the storm. They seemed disoriented. He could see the birds would be in trouble if they didn't find shelter soon, so he flicked the porch light on and off, hoping to send them away. But they wouldn't go.*

*The man then went out on the porch and made a huge racket, hoping they'd fly off to safety. But they still didn't go.*

*Then the man thought, “I have a barn that could shelter them from the storm.” He put on his jacket, went outside, pulled the barn doors wide open, and put on a light, hoping to attract the birds to safety. But they wouldn't come inside. They huddled on the ground, and continued to fly into the windows of his home.*

***“Food. Food will bring them into the barn,” thought the man. So he went inside, took some bread, returned outside and tossed bread crumbs in a path leading into the barn. Still, the birds would not come.***

***Discouraged, the man sighed, “If I could just become a bird for a while, I could lead them to safety, and show them I care about them, and want to offer them life!”***

***Just then, in the distance, the church bells rang, announcing the birth of a Savior: Emmanuel, God-with-us. The man’s heart was moved as he recognized God’s message being lived out at his home.***

George Mattheson has written with penetrating insight about the process of giving ourselves to Christ. There are two different avenues that come together in Bethlehem. He writes:

***There are two sets of minds in the Christian life—those who find Christ, and those whom Christ finds..... There are some whose experience is that of the wise men of the East; they search for the star and discover it after many days. There are others like the keepers of the flock of Bethlehem; they are engaged in their own work, and the star comes to THEM. The men of the East are men of talent; they plan and they succeed. But the keepers of the flock are men of genius; they never need to plan; they are illuminated in a moment. In the midst of their daily toil, there is suddenly with them a multitude of the heavenly host singing, “Glory!”***

Commentator Leonard Sweet sums this up:

***It is a safe bet to hazard that there are far more “wise men” than “shepherds” gathered here today. Thankfully it is true that the wise men did find their single guiding star, and they followed it laboriously across the wilderness until it finally came to rest in Bethlehem. But the shepherds, whose simple hearts were naturally open to the divine, were dazzled by a whole choir of angels and a heavenly canopy filled with the voice of pronouncement of Christ’s birth. They immediately gave their whole beings to the newborn Messiah and ran to Bethlehem to kneel before him.***

***Whether you must take the exacting route of the wise men or are able to find the shepherds’ more direct path to the Savior, start the journey...toward Bethlehem today.***

The Old Testament story of the great king David has unfolded in our Grand Sweep readings of this past week. One of David’s greatest strengths was his willingness to be corrected. He wanted to keep God’s will at the center of his life.

In today’s reading, David had been insulted by a wealthy neighbor, and he had gathered his forces and was on the way to kill the man, Nabal, and all his household. Nabal’s wife, Abigail, sees David coming, and hurries to meet him before he arrives, bringing a heartfelt apology and a multitude of gifts. David quickly recognizes that he has been stopped from doing a great wrong. He thanks Abigail, and eventually after Nabal dies of age or shock, he takes her as his wife.

David gives his heart and life to God. He strays again and again, but returns to God again and again.

Friends, we often hold others at arm’s length. It feels safer that way. But it isn’t safer. It’s actually harder to live in isolation; more difficult to have wholeness of mind, body, soul and spirit. Not

only do we hold each other at arm's length, we also keep God an arm's length away much of the time, too.

Take the chance. This year, drop your arms. Move closer to God. It is one day after Christmas, but it is never too late to come to God. Like David, we drift and stray, but we can be inspired by David's story, seeing that God will help us come back to him, after errors in judgment and sinful ways lead us astray.

Today, EVERY day, Jesus wants the most precious gift you have to offer: YOU.

(Share candy canes—as a reminder of what God has given us in Jesus. Take the candy cane home, and consider how you might offer the gift of YOURSELF to Jesus this year.)