

“The Christmas Secret”

Today’s sermon is about “The Christmas Secret”. So what IS the Christmas secret? Does it have to do with the fun of keeping secrets about who is buying what and for whom? Does it have anything to do with that amazing Santa who SEES everything we DO, and HEARS everything we SAY, even when we think our actions and words are secrets hidden from others who might judge us? Is it about Santa’s uncanny ability to keep track of us on those “naughty” and “nice” lists?

No. It’s not. And please keep in mind that God is NOT really LIKE Santa Claus. God showers us with blessings and offers us gifts with every breath we take, WHETHER OR NOT, we are “naughty” or “nice”. This is what we call “grace”: the unearned, unmerited, unconditional love of God.

The “Christmas Secret” is actually summed up in an epitaph found on a gravestone in Georgetown, Delaware. Albert J. Wildberger was a family doctor in that city for 33 years. He served as the team physician for the Sussex Central High School, and during the course of his life, was a member of most of the town’s voluntary associations and clubs. On his gravestone is written the philosophy which guided him for 61 years:

***Albert J. Wildberger, M.D., November 11, 1926-May 26, 1987,  
“The Secret of Living is Giving”***

Dr. Wildberger’s “secret” is the “secret” of Christmas.

Let’s think about this. Where is the beginning of the Christmas story? We can make a case for it being found in the Old Testament, through many passages and prophecies. But we certainly could say the story begins in this physical world with Mary of Nazareth.

Mary is invited to accept the Christmas secret by her angelic visitor. We often see this as a sweet moment in time, but the reality had to be much different. The angel’s visit was astounding in many ways. In Jewish tradition, women in general, and particularly young, unmarried girls, were not directly greeted. And this angel not only greets her, but declares that she

is favored by God. No wonder Mary was perplexed and pondered. We like to jump forward in the text, to the point where Mary tells God, basically, “Whatever you want, I’ll do. I give myself, body, soul, heart, spirit, to you completely.”

It is important to recognize that Mary’s acceptance of the Christmas Secret, that the Secret to Living is Giving, was no simpler for her than it is for us.

Before the angel appears Mary is excited at the prospect of her upcoming marriage to Joseph. She’s looking forward to creating a home of her own, to building a life and a family with her husband.

Then all her plans and expectations are shattered. Her life plans were about to be changed forever. She would bear a child, under the strangest of circumstances. She would be transformed in ways not yet imagined. Her relationship with Joseph would be altered for all time. How would he react to her news? What would he say?

Yet, filled with unanswered and unanswerable questions, Mary finds the way to say “yes” to God. And when she does this, Mary embraces the secret of living: Giving. She offered herself, all of her, to God’s mysterious will and way.

The Christmas Secret was lived out here last Sunday, wasn’t it? Children, youth and adults GAVE their talents to honor and glorify God, sharing the Christmas story in the opera, “Amahl and the Night Visitors”. We were reminded of truths that we find in Mary’s song, the words she spoke in the Magnificat, which were read by our liturgist today. A child has been born, who will be the King of Kings. He won’t wear a crown; he comes unlike any other king, and he comes for the poor. He brings down the powerful, and lifts up the lowly. He feeds the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty.

And we all, the entire congregation, became a part of the cast! Our gifts of food, to be donated to the Northern Illinois Food Bank, were collected and gathered together, as gifts for the newborn King which the Magi would soon visit. Our gifts of money, our offering, was collected and included in the bounty laid before our King.

It was a morning filled with joy and blessing. So, do you think it is true? The Secret of Living is Giving?

This really IS the Secret of Christmas, don't you see? Because God starts us off. God starts by giving HIMSELF to us—the first and best Christmas present that ever was or could ever be. God gives us himself in the flesh of his Son, baby Jesus, the Savior who came from Nazareth. And we are invited to carry that secret forward, to find OUR ways to embrace the giving that makes life worth living.

Is our traditional Christmas one way of doing this? I believe yes, it is—or it can be. But sometimes we allow the world's pressures and expectations to TAKE OVER the giving God intends at Christmas. We fuss and worry about gifts, about the expense, about letting a loved one down by NOT spending enough, about what would please the recipients, and what people might think of US, after they open the gifts we have purchased, wrapped and presented to them.

This is NOT the secret of living. This is NOT a way to embrace and live the Christmas Secret.

Some folks have been creative as they have tried to put the “Christ” into Christmas. I'd like to share a story by Nancy Gavin, “For the Man who Hated Christmas”:

*It's just a small, white envelope stuck among the branches of our Christmas tree. No name, no identification, no inscription. It has peeked through the branches of our tree for the past 10 years or so. It all began because my husband Mike hated Christmas- oh, not the true meaning of Christmas, but the commercial aspects of it- overspending, the frantic running around at the last minute to get a tie for Uncle Harry and the dusting powder for Grandma- the gifts given in desperation because you couldn't think of anything else. Knowing he felt this way, I decided one year to bypass the usual shirts, sweaters, ties and so forth. I reached for something special just for Mike. The inspiration came in an unusual way.*

*Our son Kevin, who was 12 that year, was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church, mostly black. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings*

*seemed to be the only things holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the...team obviously could not afford.*

*Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat. Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, "I wish just one of them could have won," he said. "They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them." Mike loved kids- all kids- and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse.*

*That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years, for each Christmas, I followed the tradition-one year sending a group of [handicapped] youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers who home had burned to the ground a week before Christmas, and on and on.*

*The envelope became the highlight of Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure.*

*The story doesn't end there. You see, we lost Mike last year due to dreaded cancer. But when Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped up in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition had grown and someday will expand even further with our grandchildren standing around the tree with*

*wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope...Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us...*

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

The Secret of Living is Giving. “A self-absorbed life ends up absorbing life.” (Rev. Leonard Sweet)

Are you ready to live the Christmas Secret? Our lives will change, as did Mary's. But it IS the secret of life-abundant and eternal.