



During Christmas what word is the most thought about and most often repeated? I don't think it's carol or tree or chestnut. I don't think it's the phrase Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays. It might be, "will that be cash?" or "will that be credit?" But I don't think so. I think the most repeated word during the Christmas season is repeated most in both the secular Christmas community as well as the Christian community. The word is gift. Everyone understands the word gift.

I had fun reminiscing about some of my past Christmases growing up. I thought about some wonderful gifts that were under our tree that we opened on Christmas morning. Apart from a new basketball every year, do any of you remember this awesome toy? Sure Shot Hockey. I loved that game. I wish I still had it. It would probably be worth a lot. This game came out before table top hockey, Air Hockey. What did it say on the box? *Fast scoring hockey fun, 2-4 players, by Ideal*. Remember toys by Ideal?

Another awesome gift I remember getting were Hot Wheels. I had—I wish I still had—the oval track and the supercharger. I even had that model hot wheel car. I think it was called the Splitting Image. It wasn't the fastest car, but it was one of the coolest looking ones for sure.

We all understand gifts, don't we? A favorite Christmas verse of mine that isn't found on the typical Christmas card is 2 Corinthians 9:15. This verse doesn't mention, Bethlehem, wise men, shepherds or angels. But it does talk about the gift. ***"Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"***

These words were written by a brilliant, well educated man with a broad vocabulary. He was a master of Hebrew and Greek and known as both a great oral and written communicator. More of his writings appear in the New Testament than anyone else. Outside of Jesus himself, he likely had the greatest theological mind that ever lived. As he dipped into his extensive vocabulary, he couldn't find one word in his lexicon that could serve as a perfect adjective to precede the simple noun—gift. So he invents a new word. In the original language the word is *anekdegetos*. It only appears once in the New Testament. And in English we translate it as unspeakable or indescribable.

How could this or any gift be too awesome for words? The gift he is talking about is a baby. If it was an ordinary conception, an ordinary infant, there would be nothing indescribable about him. But this baby is different.

The theme of our Christmas Series this year is, "What Child is This?". Today, we try to answer that exact question. We will in our feeble way try to describe this gift. My prayer is that the words we use will encourage us. That the words we use would strengthen our faith and give us hope. But that we would understand what Paul understood. The real story of this child is indescribable and therefore should blow our minds and set us free.

What Child is This?

He is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy

In order to answer our question, we need to go back 700 years before his birth. About 2700 years ago there was a city called Jerusalem. By this time the kingdom of Israel was divided. Also at this time Jerusalem was under attack by its own brothers and sisters to the north. Two thousand seven hundred years ago Ahaz was king of Judah, in the Southern Kingdom. Also there was a guy named Resin who was the king of Syria and another guy named Pekah who was the king of Israel. The king of Syria, Resin, and the king of Israel, Pekah, came together against Ahaz and the Southern Kingdom of Judah and they were on the brink of invading it.

At this point a prophet enters the story. His name was Isaiah. God tells Isaiah to go to King Ahaz, the king of Judah, and basically tell him not to worry because God has everything under control. God urged Ahaz through Isaiah to ask for a sign, and then God said, "I the Lord your God will give it to you." But Ahaz did not have a strong faith and he rejected God's intervention and help. The story then says that God became angry and said through Isaiah, "Ahaz, my patience is being tried by you. I'm going to give you a sign anyway, and show you how powerful I am and that your kingdom of Judah will outlive you. And long after you are gone... out of your tribe of Judah, out of your house of David will come a virgin who will give birth, a miraculous birth to a son and he will be called Immanuel."

So I wonder, when we are going through a lot of stress as certainly Ahaz was, do we ignore the signs as well? Can we go through Christmas and all of its trappings and not notice the most obvious? May God bring us to the most obvious today.

Then Isaiah said, "Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Is. 7:13-14).

There are some who say that the word “virgin” from the Hebrew should be translated “young woman.” I remember I had a professor who taught medieval Jewish history tell me this. He was a nice old Jewish professor who wasn’t a believer in Christ. But I learned since that his argument was misleading. The Hebrew word translated “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14 occurs a total of nine times in the Old Testament. Of the eight other times, seven clearly refer to virgin and not a young woman. If this was translated in Isaiah 7:14 as “young woman,” it doesn’t exactly narrow down as a special sign from the Lord. I’m sure there were lots of young women giving birth at the time of Isaiah’s prophecy. But the sign of a miraculous intervention of a virgin, becoming pregnant with a child, would be an amazing sign.

Clearly that was how Matthew interpreted Isaiah 7:14. Matthew quotes this verse in the first chapter of his Gospel, claiming that all these things took place so that prophecy would be fulfilled. When he translates the verse from Hebrew into Greek, the word he uses can only refer to a virgin. And when we read Luke’s account of Mary being visited by an angel, the angel says to her, “You’ve found favor with God, you are going to give birth to the Messiah.” Mary responds, “How can that be possible because I am a virgin?” We know how Joseph needed reassurance from an angel that the woman he was engaged to was not fooling around. The angel told him to marry this woman, Mary. “What is conceived in her is not from you, it is of the Spirit of God.”

He is God with us

He is not only a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, he is God with us. In that dark time, 700 years before Jesus’ birth, God promised a son who would be God with us. When Jesus Christ was born, Matthew says, “This is it. This is the child. This is the child that will be God with us.” That child who was born in a manger over 2000 years ago in a place called Bethlehem is God with us. *“The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”)* (Matt. 1:23).

We can see that the God of the Bible desires to be present with his people. He desires to have a relationship with them. God the most high, the Almighty one, is as someone put it, “God most High and God most Nigh.” He who exists outside of time and space also exists as Immanuel, God with us. We may be familiar with Matthew and Luke’s answer to the question, “What Child is this?” and we will read that together on Christmas Eve. But today we will hear John’s answer to the question.

He is the birth of God Himself

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning” (John 1:1-2). These famous verses written by the apostle John tell us that the one who was born of a virgin is the one who is eternal and is literally God himself. The Word, or in the Greek translated as

logos, refers to Jesus—In the beginning was the Word who will be named Jesus. John didn’t write, “In the beginning, Jesus was created,” or “After a little while, Jesus was created.” Jesus was already there in the beginning. He always existed and always will exist. From eternity past to eternity future, Jesus always was and always will be.

In John 17 Jesus talks about the glory he enjoyed with the Father before the foundations of the world. In Philippians 2, the apostle Paul talks about the fact that Jesus was God himself in heaven and enjoying the glory of God before coming to earth. John 1:3 says, *“Through him, ‘the Word’, all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”* So here is what happened: The one who made the world entered the world in person. The creator took the form of a creature and entered his creation. God became man. We let this sink in and all we can say is unbelievable. Jesus was 100% God and 100% man. Not in the sense that it’s unbelievable because it’s not true, but unbelievable because it **is** true. It’s kind of like what a San Francisco 49’ers fan might say right now. “When the season started, never in my wildest imagination would I think that the 49’ers would have twelve losses and only one win.” It’s unbelievable but true.

I think most of us who believe in God can accept on faith that this God spoke the universe into existence out of nothing, that this living God parted the Jordan River, brought down the walls of Jericho, made the sun and moon stand still. We can handle that. We just studied that in Joshua.

But what about what this living God did that first Christmas? When Caesar Augustus was the emperor of Rome, this living God entered the full orb of existence and he did it as a baby. We proclaim to one another Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays. But what would be more accurate, and what our community around us doesn’t think about is proclaiming, “God chose Flesh!” The real answer to the question, “What Child is this?” should not only blow our minds, it should set us free.

How Does this Child Set Us Free?

By coming to our place

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). John says the Word moved into our neighborhood and took up residence among us. The word for **Word** that John used is the Greek word **logos**. The word *logos* was translated into English with words like logic or rational. Why would John begin his story about Jesus by calling Jesus the *logos*? Because *logos* struck a chord in all cultures that John was familiar with. For Greeks, *logos* was a common word. *Logos* meant “rational integrating principle behind the universe.” It included all the natural laws that maintained order, unity and life in the universe. John could have said and it would have been just as accurate, “In the beginning was

the rational integrating principle and the rational integrating principle was with God and the rational integrating principle was God. All things came into being by the rational integrating principle, and the rational integrating principle became flesh and dwelt among us." For John's audience, logos was the instrument by which the living God communicates with humanity. The logos was the means by which God expresses himself.

John wanted us to know that Mary's child—who was the one who spoke all the galaxies and their stars into existence—was the one who lay in a cattle trough. When Quirinius was the governor of Syria, Immanuel entrusted himself to a teenage girl. When Herod the Great was strutting his power across Judea, God the Son needed his mother to feed him and burp him and he needed his mother to change his diapers.

John wanted us to know that the logos grew from a boy into man and learned to be a carpenter from his dad. John wanted us to know that the logos got splinters, occasionally pounded his thumb with a hammer, got toothaches, laughed and cried, got hungry and tired and mad. John wanted us to know that the logos was tempted but never gave in to temptation. John wanted us to know that the logos hung out with unholy people and enjoyed their company so much and laughed so hard that the religious people of the day thought he was a drunk and glutton. John wanted us to know that the logos wept deeply at the grave of his friend Lazarus. John wanted us to know that the logos who in the beginning created the first hydrogen and oxygen atoms and determined that two hydrogen atoms plus one oxygen atom make water. And that the logos got so tired and thirsty that he had asked a Samaritan woman for a drink of the water he first created.

The word theologians use for this grand miracle is incarnation. It means "in fleshness." Christmas is celebrating the "in fleshness" of the creator. Charles Wesley described it this way in his hymn, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*: "Veiled in flesh the godhead see; Hail incarnate Deity. Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel."

Then there is this sign we read about in the Christmas Story: "You will find a baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem." Of all the places for a king to be born, no one would have picked a place like Bethlehem. In Jesus' day Bethlehem was a grimy little place, a back water town under the authority of a corrupt governor who was a skilled politician who kept himself in power by appeasing the Jews and appeasing the Romans who ruled them. It was a place where if you spoke out against the rulers you would be put to death. Actually you might be put to death for any reason because he was insane. The taxes were high and the services were low. Everyone was poor except for the royals and their government officials. That song, "O Little Town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie," that's a lie. Bethlehem was a place where sin, darkness and bloodshed was common.

The logos was born in a miserable place. Why? Because as John said, the darkness hates the light. The darkness flinches at the sight of light. Every one of us can look back at Bethlehem places in our lives and give thanks to God that his light reached into our darkness. And Bethlehem remains miserable today. A few years back I toured Bethlehem, and to actually get into the city I had to go through security checkpoints surrounded by concrete walls with barbed wire and guard towers. It was dirty and divided.

The real and grimy story of Christmas is that God loved us so much that he made it his mission to enter into the reality of our sinful and broken world. It was no accident, no afterthought; all of it was the plan of a God executed perfectly for each of us in this room. The implications of this are huge. We humans have been given unbelievable dignity. God didn't become a whale or an eagle. God became a human to reach humans. God so loved us that he became us. Christmas expresses the unbelievable empathy of God. When we suffer, we know that God understands and has experienced everything that we have experienced and more.

It reminds me of a story. A little boy was trying to get to sleep but was frightened. He shouted down from the bedroom, "Dad, it's dark up here and I'm scared." His father shouted back, "Don't be afraid. God is with you." After a few second's pause, the boy yelled again: "Get up here, Dad - I need somebody with skin on!" This is the reality of the Incarnation. The reality is that nothing can take away our fears but God with skin on.

The real story is that we have been given unbelievable hope for the future. We have the certainty that we will be made whole. In that stable on Christmas Eve, God forever married himself to our humanity. God forever tied his future to our future. The future of those who trust in Christ as his or her savior is as secure as the future of God. Why? Because this child not only came to our place, this child took our place.

By taking our place

In 2 Corinthians 5:21 Paul says, "*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*" The logos made a deal that we can't refuse. He said, "Give me all your sin and I'll give you all my righteousness and we will call it even." He did this to win us back. Through his offer and ability to forgive our sin, redeem us, reconcile us to himself and atone for our sins, he wins us back. He satisfies the penalty needed to be paid for our sin. He wins us back. He heals us by dying for us. He atones for our sins by taking all our sins upon himself. Christmas tells us that God became fragile and breakable. God Almighty became someone we could hurt. Why? To win us back. No other world religion—not Islam, Judaism, the Eastern religions or paganism—taught that God became breakable or suffered to win us back.

There is a story in Numbers 21 of the people of Israel complaining to Moses about how God had freed them from Egyptian

slavery only to think that God had abandoned them in the desert. Because of their complaining the Lord brought judgment upon them for their sin of unfaithfulness by putting poison snakes in the camp to bite people. The people realized their sin and confessed their sin against God to Moses. God then told Moses to construct a bronze snake and nail it to a pole and hold it up before the people in the desert and have the people look at the snake and they will be healed.

In the New Testament, Jesus compared himself to the bronze snake held up in the desert to save the Israelites when he said, ***“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”*** (John 3:14-16). We look up to Mary's boy and believe (demonstrate faith) in what Mary's boy has done for us, “He who had no sin became sin for us so we might be healed.” Why would he do this? Because of love. Love gives. Our God is a giver and not a taker. CS Lewis said, “The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God.”

The real and grimy story of Christmas is that we are in trouble because of our sins and the only way out is through the God-Baby Jesus who eventually became the God-Man Jesus who died on the cross for our sins. So not only did Jesus come to our place, not only did Jesus take our place, he also invites us back to his place.

By inviting us back to His place

“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). ***“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd”*** (John 10:16). For some of you God may be calling you to listen, to really listen to the voice of God this morning. Have you ever confessed with your mouth and truly believed in your heart that Jesus is Lord, that he is your personal Savior? Have you ever surrendered to the shepherd? Have you ever said, “God I give up, I can't shepherd my life anymore. I cannot do enough good works to earn my way into the sheep pen”? ***“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand”*** (John 10:28).

Here is reality: The most comforting thing we can know this Christmas that in spite of our own Bethlehem pasts, our own Bethlehem presents, we can have a peaceful Bethlehem future. We can know the safety and security in life today as well as a life

secured in heaven for the future. Jesus cried out “It is finished” on the cross so that your Christmas can be peaceful no matter the chaos going on in the Bethlehem around you.

I want you to be assured that you have this peace this morning. God may be calling some of us here today to become Christians. You are listening and you may be hearing his voice calling you today, calling you into a relationship with him. A relationship with Jesus Christ is the greatest Christmas gift you will ever receive. It is indescribable. Here is a simple prayer you can pray to invite Jesus into your life to become your personal Savior:

Dear God. I want to thank you for this indescribable gift of your son Jesus. Thank you for coming to my place, being born in Bethlehem, living and then taking my place by dying on a cross for me. I thank you that through your death my sins went on you, and in turn I received from you forgiveness and eternal life. I believe in what you did for me, and I ask you in faith to become my personal savior. I invite you to come into my life and live in my heart and lead me from now on. Thank you for preparing a place to take me one day to spend eternity with you in heaven.

I also want to give some of us an opportunity this morning to come back to Jesus. You have either drifted or run from God and you remember what it was like to walk with God and enjoy his intimate presence and the presence of his people in your life. You miss it and you wonder if you can return. The answer is yes. God receives us and there is no condemnation. He welcomes you back to the sheep pen. If this is you, and you know who you are, rededicate your life to Christ today, Christmas Season 2016. Let me pray for you:

Dear God, we welcome back home any brothers or sisters here who have drifted or strayed from you. Thank you for bringing them back. May they experience once again their first love, and embrace your grace and mercy, and may they trust that you are a forgiving God, a God who wants your children filled and satisfied by you. May you help them to find community and be led by God once again and enjoy his grace and mercy and truth. And may God use them mightily in 2017.

Thank you Lord for answering the question for all of us, “What Child is this?” May we respond in worship with new understanding and new hope because of what we know about who you are and why you came.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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