

## Gift RETURNS

Sermon, January 12, 2020

Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Texts: Mark 1:4-11; Luke 3:15-22

The festivity of Christmas is behind us. We've taken down the greenery, boxed up the nativity characters, the wreaths and the ornaments are all down, our Advent wreath is back in the storage closet ... and in our homes, all our unwanted Christmas gifts have either been put in some other closet or quietly returned to the stores. If you've been in the stores these past week or so, I'm sure you saw the long lines at Customer Service and the counters just piled with returns. Maybe someone gave you a sweater or a shirt that didn't quite fit your style ... or maybe it didn't quite fit your body, which is shaped a bit differently from last Christmas. Or, maybe somebody gave you something you have absolutely no room for in your house, or it clashes with your décor. Or maybe your return was something given to one of your children that could prove to be downright dangerous and cause someone to get hurt, like the boxing gloves my older brother got one year from a well-meaning uncle, which he immediately tried out on my other brother's nose. Or maybe your return was a gift that was so darn complicated and you couldn't figure out how to make it work. Whatever it was, you really didn't like the way it looked or smelled or fit or tasted or worked or didn't work, so you took it back to the store to return it for something you can more easily use ... like, maybe the money that was spent for it.

Throughout Advent, we again followed the tradition of beginning each worship service by lighting one of the candles of the Advent wreath, each of the candles proclaiming one of the great promised gifts of the Messiah: Hope, Love, Joy and Peace. These are gifts given to us through the incarnation, when God became flesh and dwelt among us to bring the heavenly gifts of genuine Hope, abiding Love, profound Joy and everlasting Peace. Now ... which, if any, of these Christmas gifts do you, or someone you know, might want to return because, to tell the truth, it just doesn't really fit that well, or because you might not have room for it, or because it's just a bit too dangerous to handle, or because you think you've outgrown the need for it, or maybe because the gift is so darn complicated and you can't figure out how to make it work? Obviously, I'm speaking somewhat allegorically; pastors often do that sort of thing. Bear with me.

Maybe someone wants to return the gift of Hope. You want to return the gift of Hope because you really don't think the sentiment of hope will change anything for the better in your life or in the world as a whole. Maybe you have collected too many disappointments in life; maybe too many people who promised you great things like love and loyalty and fortune just didn't deliver ... so you've grown cynical to anything promising hope, because it always seems to come with disappointment. You've become jaded to promises of hope. You'd just as soon nobody try and give you this "gift" of hope, because the inevitable disappointment hurts too much.

Or maybe someone wants to return the gift of Love? After all, love can be a dangerous gift. In the words of the seventies pop song of the rock band Nazareth, "Love Hurts" -- *"Love hurts, Love scars, Love wounds and mars. Any heart not tough or strong enough To take a lot of pain, take a lot of pain Love is like a cloud, it holds a lot of rain, Love hurts, Ooo-oo Love hurts."* Aren't those love lyrics so ... uplifting? Later in the song, *"Love is like a flame, It burns you when it's hot"* ... Yikes! Who wants to get burned? I mean, this gift of love is potentially more dangerous than Uncle Ed's boxing gloves, so maybe you want to return it before it does any damage to you. Maybe you have been hurt by love, or maybe the gift has just proven too complicated to figure out how to work it properly, or maybe you've tried it on, this gift of love, and you think it best to return it because it really doesn't fit you right now.

Does someone want to return the gift of Joy? Maybe you have experienced so much sadness and disappointment and hurt that there is really no room left in your heart for joy. Maybe you've become cynical of the very notion of joy, and you find yourself looking at outwardly joyful people as if they are just empty headed ditzes who just don't know or haven't experienced the harsh realities of real life. Or, maybe the problem is that you have spent too many years trying to find your joy in all the wrong places ... and instead of finding joy, you found pain; instead of fulfillment, you wound up with deadened desires, a numbed soul.

Or maybe you want to return the gift of Peace? Does “peace” sound to you just like an old outdated sentimental relic of the sixties? Or like an overused nostalgic word that we drag out every December to say with the angels “Peace on Earth”, but the word really doesn’t fit the rest of the year? Certainly the whole world has known very little of Peace on Earth since the night Jesus was born; there have been wars and rumors of wars and conflict ever since. Maybe your life has known little of peace, as well. Life gives us no shortage of opportunities to be without peace, to be restless, to be anxious. We can be anxious about work, about health, about children, about money. We tell ourselves that growing up is a matter of learning to live with these anxieties ... *“Grow up, manage it the best you can.”* So, maybe all this talk about the Christmas gift of peace just sounds like a sentimental gift from an old out of touch heavenly father who doesn’t realize we’ve outgrown such illusions about the possibility of real peace, so we take it back to the Customer Service department because we’ve outgrown the need for such wishful assurances.

Well, If you are thinking about returning any of these gifts, don’t!

Receive the gifts of God. Pray that God will show you how these gifts work, and follow His instructions! *(and take time to read the divine Instruction Manual, the Bible!)* These gifts are real, they are substantial, they are valuable and they are gifts which will greatly enrich your life. There’s a sermon in itself in each of these gifts, but for now I’ll just briefly extol their worth. The Gift of HOPE: the *hope* is real and substantial, though we may not fully realize it yet. The gift of LOVE: If God’s *love* hurts, it hurts so good! He loves us for *our* good, purging our dross and refining our gold, as we just sang in the opening hymn. And as the old saying goes, God loves us just the way we are, but He loves us too much to let us stay that way! He wants the best for us. The gifts of JOY and PEACE: The *joy* is both profound and sublime and can come to us in the most unexpected ways, and the *peace* of Christ which surpasses all understanding enters into our souls and grows and grows. The gifts of PEACE and JOY which we begin to unwrap in this lifetime grow and grow and grow on into eternity. They are heavenly gifts from a heavenly father, gifts meant for our good, gifts that keep on giving as they are *received* and *opened* and are *prayerfully* put to good use.

In our two Gospel readings this morning we see John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus’ arrival on the scene. In both accounts, John says he baptizes with water, but one is coming who is more powerful than he, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. In both accounts, after the baptism takes place we are told heaven is torn open, and Jesus sees the Spirit of God descending in bodily form like a dove upon Him, and in both accounts we have the voice of God proclaiming audibly from heaven, *“You are My Son, Whom I love, with you I am well pleased.”* Luke alone, however, notices one other thing that Mark doesn’t seem to catch. There is one seemingly small, but deeply significant, detail noted by Luke alone. Luke observes, *“And as He was praying ...”* It was while Jesus was praying ... while He was in communication and communion with God ... that heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and the Voice audibly proclaimed, *“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”* It’s as if Luke wants to make subtly clear it is *in prayer* that Jesus’ identity as a child of God is affirmed. It is *in communion with God through prayer* that Jesus is empowered by the invigorating presence of the Holy Spirit. It is *in prayer* Jesus is commissioned for the office of ministry, and it is *in prayer* that He receives His wings ... the wings of the Spirit ... as He is commissioned for His divine office, after which He goes out to put his God given gifts to good use. It was after this commissioning that Jesus began His public ministry. But again, Luke notes that it was “as He was praying,” it was in that moment, Jesus hears His identity and calling unequivocally affirmed by the audible voice of God, and He receives the Spirit necessary to empower Him to go out into the world to give of His gifts, as He is commissioned to the high office of Savior and launches His public ministry..

Maybe it’s reading a lot into five little words ... “And as He was praying”... but maybe Luke is intimating that it is *in prayer*, it is while we are in communion and communication with God, that our own identities as God’s daughters and sons is confirmed, whether it is our prayers in worship, our prayers with our families, our prayers while alone. It is in prayer you and I can most often feel the empowering descent of the Spirit into our lives. It is in prayer, in communion and communication with God, that our HOPE is ignited, our LOVE is kindled, our JOY is made real, and we begin to experience PEACE, shalom, wholeness. And it is in prayer we receive our commissioning, our directives in how we can use all the good gifts God has given us for our own edification and for ministry in this world.

Let us use this celebration of our Lord’s baptism today to prayerfully re-dedicate ourselves to the office of our ministry, and go from here to share the heaven sent gifts of Hope, Love, Joy and Peace with a world so desperately in need of genuine Hope, authentic Love, deep Joy and abiding Peace..

As you see on the insert, in a moment we will have a Reaffirmation of the Baptismal Covenant, where each of us will be invited to renew the promises of our baptisms. For some of you, renewing these promises will simply be a stating of the obvious, rather like a couple who has been married for fifty years renewing their vows. For others of you, this will be a time of reconsideration, a reassessment, maybe even a repentance of how you have been living into your baptism. And there may be some here for whom this will be the first time you have thought about any sort of commitment. Prior to my asking you to stand, we will have a time of silent reflection and prayer. Take time to review the insert, and if you are prepared to recite these words in good faith, I will ask you to do something.

In your pews you will find small cups we normally use for another Sacrament. The water in these cups is from the Jordan River, at the traditional site believed to be where Jesus was baptized. We don't hold this to be some special, sacramental, "holy" water; but it may add a richer meaning for you knowing its source. If you are ready to reaffirm your baptismal promises, then I invite you in these moments of silence to dip your finger in the water as a way of remembering your own baptism, and place a dab of the water on your forehead, or perhaps touch your heart. You may want to touch both. And if you are really bold, you may even want to follow the touch of your forehead and heart with a touch to each shoulder, making the ancient sign of the cross (*don't worry, Protestants can do that*). So, we will now have a time of silent meditation and prayer; after a few moments, I will invite you to reaffirm the baptismal covenant.

## REAFFIRMATION OF THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT AND AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Do we renounce evil, and its powers in the world, which defies God's righteousness and love?

**WE RENOUNCE THEM.**

Do we renounce the ways of sin that separate us from the love of God?

**WE RENOUNCE THEM.**

Do we turn to Jesus Christ and confess Him as our risen Lord and Savior?

**WE DO.**

Do we intend to be Christ's faithful disciples, obeying His word, and showing His love, to our life's end?

**WE DO.**

Let us, then, affirm what we believe:

I BELIEVE IN GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH,  
AND IN JESUS CHRIST HIS ONLY SON OUR LORD; WHO WAS CONCEIVED BY THE HOLY GHOST,  
BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY, SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED, DEAD, AND BURIED.  
HE DESCENDED INTO HELL. THE THIRD DAY HE ROSE AGAIN FROM THE DEAD;  
HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN, AND SITTETH ON THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD THE FATHER ALMIGHTY;  
FROM THENCE HE SHALL COME TO JUDGE THE QUICK AND THE DEAD.  
I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY GHOST, THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH,  
THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS;  
THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY; AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING. AMEN.

*Let us sing stanzas 5 and 6 of "Baptized into Your Name Most Holy"*

(5) Yes, all I am and love most dearly I offer now, O Lord, to You.  
Oh, let me take my vows sincerely, and what I say, help me to do  
Let naught within me, naught I own, serve any will but Yours alone

(6) And never let my purpose falter, O Father, Son and Holy Ghost,  
But keep me faithful to Your altar, 'til You shall call me from my post.  
So unto You I live and die and praise You evermore on high.