

“Christmas: The Gift That Keeps On Giving”

Matthew 2:9-11

Scott B. Martin

I awoke EARLY this past Friday. It wasn't my alarm clock that woke me. Nor was it my normal time to wake up. It was my neighbor's car doors slamming shut as they rushed out to the early morning Black Friday Christmas Sales that woke me. It was still quite dark as I sleepily rolled over and felt around for the alarm clock. I pulled back the blind enough for the street light to light the clock. **It was 5:30 A.M.!** Oh for the good ole days when stores never opened before 9 or 10 a.m.! When did stores start opening at 4 a.m. or 6 a.m. on the day after Thanksgiving? Isn't this a bit much?

Laying there contemplating these deep thoughts I was wide awake. I decided to make the ultimate sacrifice and venture forth to a local shopping center to research this sermon today, “Christmas at the Mall.” I say sacrifice because I'm not crazy about shopping even on normal days, let alone the day after Thanksgiving, but I girded up my loins and headed forth.

It started out promising enough. The streets around my house seemed quiet and deserted. I soon found out why, half the town had already beat me to the parking lot! I parked outside the Kohl's department store, but about four or five times as far away as I had ever parked before. I almost needed a gps just to make my way to the store!

As I approached the door the early birds were streaming outside with their worms. Everyone was carrying one, two, three sometimes four huge plastic bags with their purchases. Inside the aisles were filled with shoppers and bins with big red sale tags. The line to the sales register stretched as far as I could see.

I looked around me. Some people seemed happy and festive. Some mothers were dragging around tired, grumpy children and the mothers themselves looked a bit stressed. Some wives had dazed, vacant eyed husbands following around about ten steps behind them. Some had an air of triumph about them, having found their shopping quarry amidst the maze of aisles. Others were frustrated to find the early bird special they wanted had already sold out. A number of people were on their cell phones to scattered family members trying to figure out how soon they would be done and they could get back together and go home or go get something to eat.

I was beginning to feel a bit frustrated and stressed myself. Being a great believer in killing two birds with one stone I had actually read the Kohl's flier and had three items I wanted to buy: a blanket, a car mat, and a gps. I had found the first two but the last was eluding me. I had found the rack that had their gps units, but it didn't have the ONE that was on sale. I asked one clerk and was directed strangely enough to the women's dress department. Why would they have the gps units there. No doubt some department store genius decided they would sell more stuff if they located it there. I then spent a half hour trying to find where in the women's the dress department the sale bin was located! After circling the store two more times and asking two more clerks I actually got one of the last units they had.

It would be easy to get the idea that Christmas is about material things and spending money for loved ones. Certainly there can be a material side to expressing love but have we gone off the deep end with all this? As the secular world increasingly stresses Santa Claus over Jesus one might come to think Christmas is all about Santa. It sometimes seems like for Christmas to be Christmas it has to be bigger and better; bigger trees, more lights, more presents, more expensive gifts, Like Cindy Lou Who we might do well to

ask, “Doesn’t this all seem like a bit much?” And like Cindy Lou we might well ask what is the meaning of Christmas?

It is certainly true that we often start out the Christmas season with the best of intentions. We want this Christmas to be the BEST Christmas ever, a Christmas filled with family, friends, good cheer, in a word LOVE. True, a special present, chosen especially for the person we are given to, can be an expression of this, but it is oh so hard to find the perfect gift. Commercials bombard us with ideas, some of them a bit silly. Remember those chia plants and pet rocks? We see others around us trying to top last year with bigger and more expensive gifts. Then there is the whole problem that we are flawed human beings and we don’t always get it right. We can’t always live up to our best intentions, but really, isn’t the struggle itself an important part of our expression of love in this season of the year?

Our Gospel passage tells us that the Wise Folk brought gifts to the Christ child. Being kings themselves, they brought gifts worthy of a king, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Being kings they had both the knowledge of these things and the ability to purchase them. Still, strange gifts for a carpenter’s son, even one who was so much more than a carpenter’s son. Gold, the symbol to this day of the best of material things. Crowns and wedding rings are still made of gold. Frankincense, used to anoint a corpse. Perhaps, this is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ future passion and death. Myrrh, used for healing. The Christ is sent for the healing of the nations. Maybe these gifts are not as strange as they first appear.

Perhaps even more important, they delivered their gifts in person. They didn’t let “Brown” deliver it, the camel post, they delivered the gifts themselves. You see they were not just giving material gifts, they were also offering their curiosity, dedication, and yes, even their devotion to this one

to whom the mystical star pointed. This could not be done from afar. They had to come in person to present their gifts. In doing so they offered something far more precious than their gold, frankincense and myrrh, they offered themselves.

What is the best gift you could ever receive? Is it a diamond ring or a Corvette? Is it a trip around the world? How about a new house? What does your heart desire? What would make you happy?

It might be a material thing. Occasionally I watch these home make over shows where some needy family gets a free home makeover. What makes these shows work is often the family really “deserves” the gift in some way. They serve their community in a special way. They have a loving family but not much income. They have a family member with a illness or special need of some kind. After all the work is done comes the big payoff, watching their faces as they first walk in the door of their new house.

You may not want something material. You may simply want more time with your family or friends. Looking around the world at recent events in India and our ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, you may want peace on earth. Maybe you long for companionship or a special relationship. If you could ask for anything at all what would it be?

How many of you saw the heart warming and heart breaking story this week about the young boy dying of leukemia. As is often the case he was given the opportunity to “make a wish”. This is a chance for a very sick child to ask for something special and help them achieve it in case they die.

This young boy had seen some homeless people and the struggles they had for food and shelter. He had a deep sense that this wasn't right and so he wished he could help them.

He , of course, did not have the money to help. His family was facing huge medical bills from his illness and he had no money of his own. He couldn't even physically get out and help the homeless, because his strength was gone and he was too young; but his burning and unselfish desire to help the homeless son inspired thousands of people. Money and food soon came pouring in to help the homeless. News programs were done and more money and food were sent.

The young boy lived long enough to see the beginnings of this outpouring of love; but unfortunately he has since died. What he has set in motion has not died. A fund, in his name has been set up to help the homeless. His story has gone out around the country. The love and courage he showed has inspired tens of thousands of people to tackle the problems of the homeless people who are so often invisible in our communities.

As wise as the Wise Folk were, even they could not comprehend everything the coming of the Christ child would mean. They knew he was special. They knew he was unique and so they followed that star, over hundreds of miles and countless days. They came bearing gifts but did they know as they stood by the Christ child's manger that they were looking at God's greatest gift to us, the gift of God's own self. In the Christ child God entered our world so that we might be assured of God's love for us and God's abiding presence with us. Did they realize this. I don't know. All we are told is that they returned to their homes "by a different way." The greater question for us is "Have we experienced God's greatest gift of love to us in the Christ child?" Like the wise folk of old let us draw close to the Christ child in this holy season by moving from the mall to the manger. If we can do this we will find that Christmas is the gift that keeps on giving. Amen.

