

The Greatest Gift Ever Given

John 1:1-5, 14

January 4, 2015

Tim Flora

Elder Stum started the service like this, he said, “Happy eleventh day of Christmas.” I hope that you’re still celebrating Christmas. For at least today, maybe next week, maybe beyond that, we plan to celebrate Christmas here at CPC, because the celebration really doesn’t ever end. We were reviewing quotes this morning for a quiz game that we play, and Doctor Seuss has one of my favorite quotes. He says, “Don’t cry because it’s over. Smile because it happened.” It’s a great way to view Christmas, because it’s not over. Picking up on Doctor Seuss and his wonderful storytelling capabilities, you’re probably familiar with *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. Immediately after the mean old Grinch who lived up on the top of Mount Crumpet sought to successfully steal the external trappings of all the Whos down in Whoville. And he paused for a moment, and he put his hand to his ear: “And he did hear a sound rising over the snow. It started in low. Then it started to grow.” You remember the line where, instead of the expected weeping and wailing associated with all the loss of their stuff, the Whos began to sing a unified chorus of rejoicing. And the story records for us in that moment in time when light began to dawn into the darkness of the Grinch’s heart. Quote from the story:

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: “How could it be so?”
“It came with out ribbons! It came without tags!”
“It came without packages, boxes or bags!”
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
“Maybe Christmas,” he thought, “doesn't come from a store.”
“Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more!”

What if Christmas means just a little bit more? For those of us who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and his sinless life lived and his sacrificial death willingly laid down, his victorious rising from the grave and his glorious ascension to that throne where he sits and even now in this moment intercedes for us, on behalf on ruined sinners, interceding—we know that Christmas is about more than the new Wii game or the new pair of shoes—yes, that’s me. Or even the hand-made ornament from the three-year-old that is your favorite toddler right now. Christmas is more than that. It’s about Christ. We can’t fully tap the mysteries of an absolutely sovereign God who took on flesh and blood. Mary, who swaddled and cradled and rocked to sleep her Savior—this is a mystery for all the ages, that the absolutely sovereign God would take on flesh. He would partake of the same nature as you and me, as he demonstrated the love of God for sinners. But we do want to tap as much as we can in this time that we have. So let’s read from John’s gospel, the first fourteen verses of John chapter one. Listen to God’s Word for you.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

God's Word for us. Christmas, you see, ultimately does not come with ribbons or with tags. It's not ultimately sealed up in packages, boxes, or bags. We focus on the glorious person and the gracious work of Jesus Christ given for sinners. He meets every one of our deepest needs. Off the beaten path of the dark streets of a little town called Bethlehem, the everlasting light came to shine into our darkest hearts. The hopes and fears of every one in every year found their answer in Christ that night. Who is this gift? Who is the gift, and what is the gift, and how do we receive this gift, and what do we do with all of this Christmas giving from God?

John begins his gospel differently than the other three. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all begin their gospels with the presentation of Jesus's early life as a child—the humble beginnings, the surroundings that he encountered, his relatives, the story. We heard Pastor Randy elaborate on Zechariah's song and on Mary's song. But John begins before there was a beginning. John shows us who this gift really is. He makes no bones about it. "In the beginning was the Word." He's harkening back to Genesis 1: "In the beginning, God created the earth." This same Word, the reader is supposed to take away, is God himself. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." There's a lot in this first verse. There's a lot in the second verse. For centuries, theologians have tried to mine and tap into the Christological reference here, the full deity of the person of Jesus Christ from Nazareth.

So, John tells us that the gift we celebrate at Christmas is none other than the almighty, eternal, sovereign God who created all things. We have to let this sink in just a little bit. I fear that we get a little jaded, a little familiar, with the Christmas story. The almighty, eternal, sovereign Creator of all things is being described here. Let that rest. Let that sit on us for just a bit. Can you imagine a time when there's no created thing at all? We've often tried to do this with the kids or with youth groups. Think about a time when there was nothing. You can't do it. If your imagination goes to the far reaches of space, far away from asphalt paved roads with rush hour traffic and horns honking—to the far reaches of space—you're still imagining created matter. But there was a time before all creation, and in that there was God. He brought it to be. He brought it into beginning. John draws our attention to that. "The Word in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

And then he immediately tells us that this God is a person. *He* was in the beginning with God. In just a few words, John tells us that the Word is eternal, enjoyed intimate face-to-face relationship within the Godhead, and has the same essence as God—the same being as God. And that Word of God is the agent of creation. John says everything that exists was made through this Word. And then, as if to give the negative statement of it—the positive statement: "everything that exists was made through him"—he gives it in the negative: "not a single thing that exists presently came into being apart from him." There is nothing that has life in and of itself other than God. We've got to let this stuff sink in deep, because of what follows.

There is an absolute power wielded by the one who is Creator over creation. We understand this. We know the analogy of the potter and the clay. The potter can do whatever he wants with the clay. He can fashion it however he wants. If he doesn't like this lump, he'll take that off and start again. This is who we're describing. John is telling us that the Word is the Creator. He has absolute power over all of his creation.

And then John tells us that he has life in himself. In verse four: “In him was life.” *Zōē*. That’s the essence of being. He has life, and that life was the light of men. You and I have being because of God. We don’t have being in and of ourselves. That’s what John is trying to make clear, because the person of Jesus Christ that he presents in this gospel is a special, unique, extraordinary person. Everything that is created has a being, and so, rightly stated, we could say that we’re becomings. We’re human becomings. We’re not human beings. We don’t have the essence of being within ourselves. It’s been given to us by another. John is telling us that the Word is the one that brings that.

He is life. He is light of men. Often death and darkness are used interchangeably. They’re connected, and life and light are interwoven here. In fact, the same construction in the Greek—the life was the light, and the Word was God. They’re constructed exactly the same, because we are to see that life and light go hand in hand, as does the Word and God. He is fully God. Same essence.

Now, if we just stopped at the first five verses. That’s enough for us. We could stop and we could worship this being for all eternity, because of his power and his majesty and his sovereignty. That would be enough, would it not, for us to see the Word as majestic and lifted high? He’s more than worthy of our worship. That’s why we wanted that to settle in. Let that settle in. Why? Because then John tells us this amazing truth. Sinner, listen. The God that made you, that has absolute power over your existence, became flesh and dwelt among us. That is the miracle of Christmas. That’s the wonder of God’s love. He didn’t have to do that. He wasn’t obligated to us in any way.

And yet, John says, this Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus is the Word who took on flesh and blood in order to accomplish the plan of redemption that was laid before the foundation of the world. The invisible God made himself visible to man. The infinite God took on the finite, wrapped himself in a body. Eternity entered into time. The author of life made himself subject to death. And he did so for us. Let it sink in. Let it once again enthrall our hearts and bring us to hallelujahs and joy. That’s what it’s supposed to do. Without diminishing his deity, he took up humanity. Two natures—fully God, fully man—in one person. That’s the incarnation. The Word dwelt among us. You may have heard this before, but that Word dwelt here. The word being use is “a tent.” He came and dwelled among us. He tabernacled among us. He set up a tent among us to live as one of us. He came to dwell with his creatures. Whenever you and I are tempted to doubt God’s love, remember that he came to dwell among us. He didn’t have to. He chose to. Isn’t that good news? Hallelujah. The Old Testament God dwells in tents among his people. In Exodus 40, God dwelt in the tabernacle. In 1 Kings, God’s presence, he dwells in the temple. And we see here, the one who is self-existent, sovereign, Creator over all things, came to dwell among his people. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

Have you ever thought about why Jesus is designated as the Word? Words are a powerful thing. Words build up. Words tear down. Words can help reveal what’s happening on the inside of us. We have this phrase that we use around our house—I don’t know, maybe you use it at yours—“use your words.” Somebody might need the salt, they go, “*Unh.*” Someone needs a napkin and their mouth is full. Use your words. Or maybe they burst into tears after coming home from an outing with friends. “What’s wrong? Can you tell it to us so that we can help?” Words are how we articulate what’s happening inside. It’s how we express our thoughts. It’s how we express our emotions. And when God wanted to demonstrate his love, he gave Word. He gave to us the Word. He wanted to communicate that he didn’t want to leave us in our sinful condition. He didn’t want to leave us under his wrath. He didn’t want to leave us condemned.

We know that the Scriptures are clear when it teaches that condemnation wrests upon all of creation because of the fall. But the Word came and dwelt among us so that we might be saved. This is God’s way. All the way through the end of history as well. In Revelation twenty-one, we see the same picture—God coming to dwell among his people. Revelation twenty-one, verse fourteen, this is John again, he says:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

That's what we look forward to. That's why the Word came. When we sing *joy to the world, the Lord is come*, we look forward to that day. We look forward to the day when his blessing will be known as far as the curse is found. We look forward to that day. That's the end goal for which he came. Where the Word came so that we might behold the glory of God reconciling sinners to himself through the substitutionary atonement of the Son of God.

So, what is this gift? I've got four things that I want to try to go through really quickly with you. The gift he is for us is that he is life for our death. Jesus came so that we might not fear death. He came so that death might be once and for all conquered. We can't do that. We don't have that kind of power, but the God who created all things, the God who holds that in his grasp, can. And he did. He became life for our death. The Scriptures teach us the sobering truth that we all deserve. The wages of our sin, the payment, the just deserving end of our sin, is death. But the gift of God, the free gift of God, is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. That's why Christ came. Jesus lets us in on that when he spoke in chapter ten: "The thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy, to keep us in misery. But I came that they might have life, and that life abundantly." "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus said, "and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." That's what we need at Christmas. That's what we need every single day of our lives. We need to know that someone loved us enough to give himself in our place. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. He is life for our death.

He is light for our darkness. There's a real danger to believe that the darkness of our heart and the darkness of the world around us is not as deadly as it really is. In fact, we probably run to so many things to keep us from thinking about our appointment with death. We do. I do. Entertaining myself, movies, games, all manner of pursuits godly and otherwise, in order to keep from thinking about the darkness, the death. And yet Jesus tells us that he has become our light for our darkness.

Have you ever pondered the lyric from that song, *O Holy Night*, that song we sing at Christmas time? *Long lay the world in sin and error pining / Till he appeared —till he broke through, till he epiphanied, till light suddenly appeared on the darkness, till he appeared — and the soul felt its worth.* Have you ever thought about that? I know I've said this before to you all perhaps in a different setting—what is it that the soul is feeling there, when it's feeling its worth? I think we feel, maybe in two ways. When the Holy One, when the Perfect One, when the Pure One, appears on the scene, this soul feels how impure it really is. When the standard of God's righteousness is raised up for me to evaluate my life, I realize my soul's worth. I'm a sinner—a black-hearted sinner, at that. It's like when you open up a brand new white shirt from the package, and you stand side by side with the white shirt that you're wearing and you have been wearing for a while, the word white is employed very loosely. Then you see the comparison. The soul feels its worth.

But I think we also feel the worth of the soul in the other way—that the self-existent Creator of all things would care enough about me to leave the majesty of heaven to become obedient to death, even death on a cross, even a cross intended for my sins. That he would consider the worth of a soul being saved by crushing the only begotten Son of God in my place. That's how the soul feels its worth. That's why we sing hallelujah, praise be to God, rejoicing. How can it be that you, my God, should die for me? And we come to understand and we believe more and more. Why would we ever consider continuing in our darkness when the light has come? Why indeed. In John eight, Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." That's what Jesus came to bring. Maybe you don't feel like you are overflowing with light. Maybe you don't feel like this recent week or month has been an outpouring of the glorious light of the Savior in your life. Good news. Good news for you. Jesus came to die for sinners—people that don't get it right all the time.

So he's life for our death, he's light for our darkness, he's truth for our ignorance. I recently rediscovered the age-old love/hate relationship that apparently males have with instruction manuals. I'm sure it doesn't happen to you, but we were redoing one of the rooms over the break, and one of the things that I was tasked to do was install a new ceiling fan including light kit. Dana had gone to Home Depot and picked out the one set for this bedroom. I uncrated it and, of course, set the little paperwork aside. What's that? And began to go about rummaging through all the parts and looking at stuff. Now, this is a ceiling fan including light kit, so it's got like fifty wires coming out of it. And there's only three wires coming out of the ceiling. So I realize, I'd better go back and get that discarded gum wrapper that I call the instruction manual. Because if I don't, I won't know what reality is.

If I don't understand what the truth is, then I'll remain in my ignorance—about the ceiling fan, and about a thousand other things. You see where this analogy is going? I hope so. God has given to us the Word. He wants to reveal himself to us. He chooses to reveal himself to us. You've gathered here today to hear the Word. God, please bless this time. So that we might see him more clearly. We know nothing about God except that which he reveals to us whether it be through his general revelation in creation or through the specific revelation of his Word. That's how we become filled with truth and not ignorant about who God is. We know nothing about ourselves or what we are truly like except that he reveals that to us in his Word. We know nothing about the Savior that he has provided for us except that he reveals the Word to us by the Spirit. We don't know what kind of lives are pleasing to God except that he brings truth to bear on our lives. You see? He became truth for our ignorance. He was full of grace and full of truth. Truth for our ignorance.

And the last point: the Word became flesh to become grace for our sins. I don't know how many of you make New Years' resolutions, but usually about December 31st to January 1st at our house, the conversation generally sounds something like this: "In the New Year I want to be more kind to others." "In the New Year I want to have more self-discipline in my personal life." "In the New Year I want to be more..." fill in the blank. Sometimes it's, "I want to drink more Dr. Pepper in 2015 than I drank in 2014." I'm not sure how serious all those resolutions are, but we know one thing. I've never heard New Years' resolutions that sound like this: "In the New Year, I want to be more self-centered. I want to make sure that I get what I want and when I want it." "In the New Year, I want to treat others harshly and push them away before they have a chance to hurt me." "In the New Year, I want to use my tongue to tear others down so that they know just who they're dealing with." We don't make those resolutions because they come naturally. That's a part of our sinful nature. That's what we do by nature. We resolve things that are more in keeping with God's Word and his plan for our lives, because we know that that's where we need to be heading. Our Creator knows that more fully than us. That's why the Word came. In Romans seven, the apostle Paul wrote a passage just for me. Maybe you've read it to, and it's just for you.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

You see? That's why Jesus came. And he didn't come once in a blip and then disappear. He came to dwell among his people. When he ascended back to his Father, he said, "I will send another just like myself, the Holy Spirit, and he will reign in your heart. He will live in you, and he will compel you to understand that these commands are not burdensome. These commands are light and life." This is the life that God wants for you. It's what he intended from the beginning. Your righteous deeds are not adequate to please him. Jesus said his righteousness is. That's why when he lived a sinless life, he offers that to all who believe, and by faith you can receive that gift of a perfect record. By faith, you can believe and receive the finished work of Christ on the cross. You can have every one of your sins forgiven, covered by the blood that was shed.

What do we do with this Christmas gift of the person and the work of Jesus Christ? Jesus said it best: believe. You don't have to shore up what he's done. You don't have to meet him halfway. You don't have to decide, "Well, let's see, this is God's part and this is my part." Believe that he has done it. And then by grace, acknowledge that you're a sinner in need of a Savior. That's the hardest part, because we have to admit, we have to humble ourselves, and admit that we aren't what we should be. Nobody likes that. I know I don't. I hate that, in fact.

I had an encounter with one of my daughters who brought just a brief word of correction. And I knew she was right. She was so right. It was like a neon sign was floating above her head, in the space above her, saying, "I am right and you know I'm right!" But she never said that. She'd never say that. She said, "Dad, don't you think that..." and she filled in. And man, I didn't want to admit it. She was right. And I did admit it. Right? Nod a head back there. See, they're nodding. Because I don't want to be the person that she described. I want to be who God desires me to be. John had that in mind when he wrote about the claims of Jesus. He wrote in John chapter twenty, almost to the end of this gospel he says, "I write so that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, he is the Messiah, he is the one who came to save. The Son of God. And by believing, you may have life in his name." The great name that we sang about. Call upon the name of Jesus and be saved.

It begins there, but it doesn't end there. It continues all the days of our life. That's why we sing *Joy to the World*. Do you have the assurance that Jesus is yours? Do you have the assurance that that foretaste of glory divine, that glimpse of heaven, will be yours? When we sing *Joy to the World*, have you ever thought about it not looking back to the first advent but looking forward to the second advent? I saw this presented somewhere in the last couple weeks—I could not find it again—but this is a wonderful thought. We sing about *Joy to the World*, that day when all the earth will receive her king. The day when the reign of the Savior is openly recognized by everyone. The day when no more sin or sorrows grow nor thorns, the evidence of the fall, will infest the ground. The day when he makes his blessings to flow as far as the curse is found. The day when his rule with truth and grace will be testified, will be proved, by all the nations of the world. Those who claim him and those who do not will bow the knee to this Word who became flesh. The day the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love will be fully known. It'll no longer be a walk of faith. It'll be by sight. It'll be the reality of our experience. Right now, by faith, we gather as weary, heavy-laden sinners to sing praises by faith, to see with eyes of faith the sacrifice of the One that we haven't seen, and to trust. In fact, to stake our very soul, on the fact that Jesus Christ died for sinners. Let me pray for us.

Gracious heavenly Father, we ask that you now be at work in us in a particularly way, Lord, each of us. God, help us to realize that the familiar passage of John chapter one is—make it particular, and point it to us today. Lord, I need this in my heart. I pray it for the ones here with us, that we would see the wonder of your love, the glory of your righteousness, and the beauty of the holiness of a God who would give himself in our place. Lord, I pray that as we sing this song, that you would give to us the blessed assurance that Jesus is mine, and that we would rejoice in the glorious foretaste of that heavenly dwelling. The dwelling place of God is with man. You will be our God, and we will be your people. You will wipe away every tear from our eye. There's no more death. There's no more sorrow. There's no more pain. Praise be to God. We ask for this in Christ. Amen.