

(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

What I'm Getting You for Christmas

You might not know that I am a snooper. These days, I'm a reformed snooper. But in my younger days of snooping, this time of year was prime snooping time. Because I definitely do not like surprises about things that will happen to me. One of the biggest triggers in my life for snooping was wrapped packages just sitting around, minding their own business, under the Christmas tree. I touched every one that had my name on it. (Which led my parents to stop putting gift tags on the packages—and to trust their memories—which were not always correct—on Christmas morning to dole out the presents.) I ran my hands down the side of the package, feeling for any tell-tale lumps or bumps. I tipped it slowly from side to side and rotated each package around and around feeling the weight and the empty space inside. I thoroughly evaluated any lightweight wrapping paper where a label or identifying marker might show through.

Now, I'm not proud of this.

But there was this insatiable curiosity about what I was going to get when the presents were opened (actually, what I was going to get before the presents were opened). I'd even try to wheedle out of my sister what she was giving me. "If you tell me now, I'll forget by Christmas" I'd lie. And of course, she knew better than to tell me.

You know how bad behavior most often puts you in an awkward spot? Well, when you have spotted some of your gifts ahead of time you have to manufacture being surprised and delighted when you finally get to open the box in front of those who gave you the gift. Sometimes that is easy, like when you get an Easy Bake oven. But sometimes it is hard, like when you get a roll of packing tape.

You know that adage, it is more blessed to give than to receive? Well, a few years back, Garrison Keillor wrote a piece for the Lands' End catalog about the difficulty that comes with Christmas receiving.

Keillor wrote, "A Christmas gift represents somebody's theory of who you are, or who they wish you were...[Imagine that] you see yourself as a suave dude [this is Garrison Keillor talking] and a swift intellect and then one year your wife—your *wife*—gives you a pair of singing undershorts that perform 'O Tannenbaum' when you sit down and a battery-powered coin bank in which a little farmer picks up the coin in his pitchfork and hoists it into the silo? That's when you go through a sort of identity crisis. You'd like to get a gift that aims high—Whitmans' *Leaves of Grass*, a ticket to Nepal...instead here is a pair of bedroom slippers with lights in the toes so you can see your way to the bathroom at night, or a rubber ball on a paddle. Not the thing an inquiring mind would spend a lot of time with."¹

I'd say Garrison Keillor is right—a Christmas gift often tells a great deal about who some other person thinks we are, or wants us to be. And that can be a disappointment in the case of

¹ Garrison Keillor, "What I'm Giving You for Christmas," Lands' End Catalog, 1997.

bedroom slippers with lights in the toes or it can be a life-changing experience as we hear in Mary's magnificent song.

Last week we heard it sung and this week we hear it read and in Mary's song, we get a peek at the gift God is giving the world. And we don't even have to snoop! It's there for all the world to see and hear—the Creator who made each one of us wants us to know the gift she is giving to the world.

“The gift is not just a sweet little innocent baby—or something that will make us feel good—or someone who will affirm everything about us and put a stamp of approval on everything we want to do.

“Look at the wrappings again: an obscure village, a young unmarried girl, a feeding trough for animals,”² a welcome from outcasts. We might be fooled by the gift wrapping into thinking this is a gift of little value. But for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, this is a gift that tells us who God thinks we are and what God intends for the world to become. God gives us the gift of our best selves and a peaceful and just world.

This gift is one of mercy for those who revere God. And strength that scatters the proud, brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly. This gift fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty so they will know their real hungers at last.

Mary sings about all these things—long before Jesus is born. She sings it in the past tense—as if it has already happened—as if the hungry have been fed, the lowly have been lifted up, the proud and powerful have been brought down. But we know that wasn't the case in the 1st century and it certainly isn't the case now.

So perhaps this gift comes with “some assembly required.” Mary sees and sings about what the Creator is still creating among humanity and for all creation. And in Jesus we receive an invitation to be part of God's gift—creating and crafting a world where no one is poor because everyone has what they need to live. Creating and crafting a world where everyone is equally valued and treated as a beloved child of God. Creating and crafting a world where mercy is in abundance and love is the guiding star.

I know that some of you will be up very late tonight assembling gifts you will give to others. Perhaps we will all be humming Mary's song and will spend the rest of this year, and the new one to come, assembling ourselves and the world into the people God desires for us to be and a world that God desires for all.

² Jane Larsen-Wigger, sermon preached December 24, 2000, p3.