

Luke 2:8-16 – Ageless Advent Questions: For Me?

For me?

That is a question that will be heard a lot next week as gifts are given and received. *For me?*

Somewhere along the line, though, many Christians, even churches, stopped asking that question. God was no longer seen as a gift giver and we as the recipients of His gifts. God became a demanding God; a God who demanded gifts from us.

But gifts can't be demanded, can they? If they are, they aren't gifts anymore – but payments. And so it began to be with God. Many viewed what they did as payments to God. Payments for their sins. The whole Bible, all of Scripture, was turned upside down.

Because that's not how the true God is. That's how false gods are. The Baals of the Old Testament, and the false gods today. False gods today like riches and success, two of the more popular ones, which demand such sacrifice, leave people always striving for more, and for which people often pay with health, family, and happiness. It's no wonder so many have strayed from the church. If their false gods are making such demands on them, who needs another God making even more!

But the Scriptures paint quite a different picture. Of a God who gives and is always giving. Even when He commands, it is so that He can give! Repentance is to give forgiveness. Sacrifices are to give atonement. The Divine Service is to give us Himself.

Christmas is the time many people wake-up to that – at least for a little while. For here is a gift that is clearly a gift – the gift of God's Son, born into the world. That we did nothing for. That we could do nothing for. But a gift from God is only half the picture. The other half is our Ageless Advent Question for tonight: is this gift for me?

So tonight we heard the story of the Bethlehem shepherds, to whom the angels came and said: **Fear not, for behold, I bring you – you shepherds! – good news of great joy that will be for all the people.** But not just for all people. **For unto you – for you shepherds! – is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.**

You've undoubtedly heard those words many times. And familiar words we tend to skip over because we know them so well. Don't. Notice that the angel is not only announcing the gift, but that yes, the gift is for you, shepherds.

Now, I don't know what you think of shepherds, but throughout the Bible, to be a shepherd was not a job people aspired to. It was looked down on. It was hard, dirty, often lonely work. Shepherds were generally not people you wanted to hang out with. If a shepherd were to ask for me the answer usually would be a resounding no!

Except this night. Tonight, there was a gift for them. For lowly shepherds. One who would turn out to be a shepherd Himself – the good one, in fact. And who wanted to be one! And had it not been told by angels, the shepherds probably wouldn't have believed it. Nobody gives gifts to shepherds! Except God. He does. For with God the last are first, the low are high, the poor are rich, the unwanted are wanted and shepherds are honored. These are the ones perfect for His gifts. The empty that He fills with His gifts of grace and love.

That baby lying in the manger is no demanding God, but a God who – as the angels proclaimed – had come to give peace on earth. Peace between God and man. Peace that we throw away with sin, but which forgiveness will restore.

But is this gift really for all people? For me? For after all, didn't the angels say: **and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased?** So, not for all people – only those with whom God is pleased?

But that is our old, upside-down thinking creeping back in ... that we have to do something for this gift. No. The old King James translation of this verse says it this way: **and on earth peace, good will toward men.** That's better. Because God's gifts, God's peace are not limited to only a few, but they are for all. For me. God's good will is for all people. For all people to be His children.

In the reading from Isaiah tonight we heard that **the Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth.** There is no one He does not want to hear this Word. And what were the words Isaiah proclaimed? He is the prophet of the word of the virgin birth, the word of a light in this dark world of sin, the word of a branch that would grow from the stump of Jesse, the word of God's servant who comes and suffers the punishment our sins deserved. And this word, too, as we heard tonight: that **as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.**

Let those words soak in for a moment. God is not disappointed in you or mad at you or demanding from you but rejoices over you like a bridegroom over his bride! How can that be? It must be a gift.

Those shepherds that night near Bethlehem got that. They heard the for you of the angels. We hear it, too. And need to keep hearing it! For when you sin, when you fall again, when you fail, when you aren't the person you know you should be, Satan will be right there, whispering in your ear, that this is not for you! You don't deserve it.

And maybe you've turned to God and asked: is this really for me? If so, you're not the first, and you won't be the last. But during this Advent season, the answer to that question is a resounding yes! For you. Who else? For Jesus is a Savior not for those who do not need a Savior, but exactly for those who do. For you. For shepherds, for fishermen, for tax collectors, for adulterers, for prostitutes, for lepers, for the weak, for the low, for the outcast, for the forgotten, for the ignored, for the homeless, for the hungry, for the cold, for the unloved, for the deplorables, for the struggling, for the hopeless, for the left behind, for the fatherless, for the widow, for the downtrodden ... for you.

So when you hear that question asked this year – For me? – smile. A smile of faith. And know that whatever gifts you do or do not receive, this gift of God is for you. From the one who came to be your shepherd. To do that job no one else would do – to die for you. Which is the best gift of all. Or as the angels put it: **For unto you – yes, you! – is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**