

December 27, 2009
First Sunday of Christmas

“Keeping the Excitement”

Text: Colossians 3:12-17, Luke 2:22-40

Was there any shouting for joy this Christmas at your house? You know what I’m talking about. With most gifts there are smiles, and “wows” and “thank yous.” But every once in a while someone receives that gift that they wanted so bad or a gift that they hadn’t even dared to expect that when they peel the wrapping paper back and see what it is, they just lose it. They scream, jump up and down, run over and give the giver of the gift a big hug, then they scream again, hug again, maybe even cry some. It’s a heartfelt reaction to a great gift; one the receiver can’t control—it just happens.

But over time—usually rather quickly—the awe and excitement and giddiness a person feels when they first receive the gift fades into mere gratefulness and appreciation. Often the gift eventually becomes just another part of life; something taken for granted. Sometimes even, rather often in the case of outgrown toys, the gift becomes unappreciated, unwanted and eventually finds itself on the curb with the trash.

It’s different with the gift we celebrate receiving at Christmas. It must be. There is no other gift that is like the gift of God’s own Son come into our human flesh to save us from our sins. Other gifts may give us some joy and happiness for a time in this life. Jesus Christ is unique in that He is the only gift we receive that gives us joy, peace and happiness in the face of our own mortality.

Think about it. What kind of look do you think you’d get from somebody if you showed up at their deathbed as their life was ebbing away with a 52” HDTV with a bow on it? They’d think you were nuts. We may bring flowers or cards or things to let a dying person know they are loved and to make their last days more comfortable. But the fact is, everyone who has ever brought one of these gifts to a dying person has felt the gesture, while kind and good-hearted, was kind of feeble and useless in the grand scheme of things. The only thing that gives people real comfort, yes even joy and happiness in the face of death, is the certainty of salvation and life through Jesus Christ.

Simeon is the great example of this. We assume that Simeon was an old man because the Holy Spirit revealed to him that *“he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ,”* so it makes sense that his death was looming close at hand. Once he sees Jesus he says, *“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation...”* The gift of God had entered the world. Simeon was at peace with dying because He was assured that all of God’s promises were true in Jesus. No other gift would make him feel this way and say these words and He reacts with great joy.

But do you folks ever get the feeling that you’re kind of treating this unique and wonderful gift of God like one of those other presents? You know what I mean. We love that Jesus is in our lives and all that He’s done for us, but there’s a lot of stuff going on in life. It’s hard to keep your mind on God all the time. There’s work to be done and play to be played. There’s all sorts of tasks, both interesting and mundane, to get through every day. Yeah, Jesus is the greatest gift ever, but how are you supposed to keep Him fresh and new and exciting all the time?

And let's face it. For most of us the thought of dying isn't looming over our shoulder every minute. For a lot of us it doesn't even come on our radar unless somebody close to us dies or if we go on Martin Luther King drive during Christmas season. The reassurance of eternal life is there, but it doesn't hit us like Simeon as something we're ready to step into any moment.

No, the truth is that we can and do let God's great gift fade into mere gratefulness and appreciation. We can and do let it become just another part of life; something we take for granted. Worst of all, in our sin in this fallen world there is the danger that we will even push away this gift, let it become unwanted and throw it out of our lives.

How do we keep such things from happening? It's quite simple actually. We keep receiving the gift.

Our heavenly Father did not send Jesus into the world to be born, live a perfect life, die on the cross to pay for the sin of the whole world and rise to new and eternal life in victory just so He could ascend back to heaven and leave us to our own devices. Jesus told us, "Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

God gave us the Word and the Church that forgiveness through Jesus would continue to be proclaimed day after day and the continuing gift of the Holy Spirit would work faith in the hearts of God's people day after day. Think about the many ways God gives us this wonderful gift; Holy Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the corporate confession and absolution in our Divine Service of worship, the forgiveness believers can speak to one another in truth anytime anywhere, the promises of God found all over the place in His Holy Word, the Bible, the simple gift of prayer by which each one of us can enter the presence of almighty God, say "I'm sorry," and know that we have been made righteous in Christ's blood are a beloved daughter or son of our Father in heaven.

Again and again we are in fact just like Simeon. The cloud of death hangs over us in the form of our sins, but we turn to the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives and know that sin holds no power. We can depart in peace because God's Word of grace and mercy has been fulfilled. The gift is received and we can stand up from the rail, close our Bible or say "Amen" to our prayer in happiness, peace and joy.

So are we supposed to run around squealing with giddiness all the time? No. That would make it real tough to get through a sermon. But I think we can live out whatever we do in our lives reflecting the wonderful gift that has been given us; striving to be the new person that the gift of Jesus Christ in our life has made us. This is what Paul tells Christians in most of his letters to various churches.

In today's reading from Colossians he writes, *"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."*

We're doing all that right now, aren't we? We're in church doing all these things Paul tells Christians to do. And we go from here out to the rest of our lives and just keep on doing it. No problem, right? Yes it is a big problem; huge problem. But that is the wonder of the gift. Every time we fail to live life in imitation of the perfection of Jesus, He is right there to give the gift to

us again. The love and forgiveness through Christ is there all the time and in many different ways.

Receive it and react to it with joy, peace and happiness, again and again and again.
Amen.