

**The Gift**  
**Christmas Eve, 2009 – Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ**  
**Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close**

**Merry Christmas! We are gathered here tonight to celebrate God's gift of Jesus ...the Feast of the Incarnation. My New Testament professor, Reggie Fuller said that tonight is about celebrating God's self-disclosure ... Immanuel, "God with us." God has given us the gift of light and life in a baby, and we call her Jesus.**

**The Christmas story is very familiar to us. But more important, it is about ordinary people becoming part of God's extraordinary story. Tonight ... we become part of that story as well. God gives us the gift of a baby, the promise and hope for a new world. Life will never be the same for us when Jesus comes into our lives!**

**I want you to take a moment and grab a piece of paper, a pen or a pencil. You can even use your bulletin. Now, close your eyes and think about the best gift you have ever received. Have you got it? Can you see it? Now open your eyes and write down this best gift you've ever received. Write down the first that comes to mind.**

**We think of Christmas is all about gift giving. We have the tradition started by St. Nicholas, a 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop. His stories of gift giving have become legendary. You know who we have changed him into ... Santa Claus! Yes, there is a truth, a Christian bishop, behind the popular figure! We have just come through the flurry of seeking the right gift for people we love ... we've just been caught up in the frenzied search battling crowds and traffic ... right up to today! The right gift ... hmmm ...**

**Have you thought about the best gift you've ever received? I think of all the Christmas seasons I have seen over the years ... and all the gifts that I have given and received. It's hard to choose which one is best ... especially when some of those gifts came at other times of the year, not just Christmas.**

**My best Christmas gift? Well ... let's see. I was married during Christmas tide, 35 years ago this January 4<sup>th</sup>. That's when I received the best gift ever ... my wife Diane. Then came the great gifts of Jennifer and Sean, my children. Then 25 years ago I was ordained to the priesthood, again a great gift. These have been the best gifts in my life. These are the gifts that have transformed my life, brought joy and light and made me who I am today.**

**What we need is the gift of light ... something to brighten that darkness that threatens our lives. This darkness is marked by paralyzing fear, deep despair and crippling hopelessness. It's the soldier far from home fighting a war ... it's the sense of scarcity ... the lost job ... the sickness that robs energy and strength ... it's the parents who can't have a child ... the broken relationships ... the crime that plagues our streets ... the poverty that robs peoples dignity ... and people drifting farther and farther away from God.**

**When is this time? It's now ... and it was 2000 years ago in Palestine. It's in these dark moments that we need some glimmer of light and life. It's in these times that we want a gift that will tell us life is worth living. We too often let the world overcome us with darkness. We dwell too much in these shadows. It's into this dark world that our God comes. Out of**

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love for us, God sends us life, and love and light. It came 2000 years by way of an angel to a young woman. The angel, a messenger of God, announced a new light is coming ... as a baby. He is named Jesus, “he who saves.” The angels bring the good news that very same time to shepherds, some of the outcasts of the world, with a message of light. The light is coming. God has chosen to bring **THE GIFT** into our lives!

This is the light, the love of God that we celebrate tonight. This is the light that dispels and overcomes the darkness. It heals the sick, befriends the lonely and broken, it comforts those who are mourning, gives a child to a childless couple, it brings peace to the soldiers, confidence to the discouraged, hope to outcasts, joy to those who are sad ... this is about **JESUS**, the best gift ever! This is what Christmas is all about, God’s gift of love and light to us. This is the blessing that comes into our lives this night.

A child ... a small infant ... Jesus ... is the one who will change our lives! God cares about us, loves us and brings us hope in the baby Jesus.

I’d like to share a story with you. Fred Craddock, the professor of preaching at Candler University in Atlanta, tells the story of a friend Dr. Oswald Goutler. Goutler was a missionary in China for 30 years. He was under house arrest with the Chinese Communists for 3 years. They promised to let he go if went home. He said yes. Goutler got the money from his missionary society and made his way to India to catch a ship. When he arrived, he learned that in the coastal city there were Jews sleeping in barn lofts throughout the city. There were denied entrance to every country but this one.

It was Christmas. Dr. Goutler went to the barns and greeted the people he met with “Merry Christmas!” They said, “We’re Jews.” He said, “I know, but it’s Christmas!” They said, “we don’t observe Christmas, we’re not followers of Christ. We’re Jews.” He said, “I know. But what gift would you like for Christmas?” They said, “We don’t keep Christmas.” He said, “I know. But is someone gave you something for Christmas, what would you like?” They said, “Some good German pastry.”

Goutler went into the city and search for a German bakery. He found one, cashed his ship passage money, bought the food and took it to the Jews, and said, “Merry Christmas!” Then he wired the society and said, “I need a ticket home.” When he got to Atlanta, he shared this experience. One young student in the front row was angry. He Said to Goutler, “Why did you do that? They don’t believe in Jesus.” Goutler said, “But I do. I do.”

Many people don’t believe ... but I do ... and I think you do ... because you are here tonight. It’s Christmas. Jesus has come. We have this wonderful gift from God. It has the power to shatter any darkness that we have ... do you believe this? So tell me, what was the gift you thought about or jotted down? I’d like to invite you to put Jesus up there with the best gift ever. He is light ... and love ... and peace ... and joy ... and hope.

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Meister Eckhart, a 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic said, “Christmas is something that happens within us when we let God in.” The gift of Jesus, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace, the promised one invites us to take him in tonight.

We are asked to believe, to be changed, to receive God’s gift. Then we can be like Dr. Goutler, or Mary, or Joseph, or those shepherds, or the disciples, or the millions of Christians that have gone before us. We can show that we do believe. We can accept the gift of Jesus, and be gifts ourselves to one another.

Jesus is our gift this night. Receive God’s gift, become part of God’s joy! May we share the gift of life and love and light with all whom we meet this night!

Merry Christmas!