



CHRISTMAS GIFTS: THE DIVINE MANGER

Luke 2

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This past month has been a time of joyful exploration of all various gifts God gives us in Advent. We began with the Divine Alarm Clock. John the Baptist, as annoying as he was, woke us up to prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord. Next, we encountered the Divine Mailbox and the Divine Mailman, through the Angel of the Lord who appeared to Mary. This Angel brought five gifts all wrapped into one message: reassurance, purpose, support, love, and presence.

These gifts, of course, enable us to fully receive the greatest gift of all, the gift of the Divine Child.

The Bible continually refers to salvation as the gift from God, according to Paul it is an indescribable gift because it fills us with indescribable joy. In Ephesians we hear,

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.

In fact, in the Greek language all these concepts are intertwined into one root word – *xarin*.

It means grace, favor, gift, - and God's grace, favor, and gifts are all encapsulated and find their greatest realization in this Divine Child.

In *Summa Theologiae* I-II: 110, Thomas Aquinas gives three ways in which *xarin*, (grace) is said in ordinary speech:

to be in someone's love or favour,
to receive a gift,
and the gratitude for the gift.

This is all found in Jesus. We are in God's favor, so we receive the gift of the Christ child, which leads to our lives of gratitude.

First, let us explore the favor of God. It begins all the way at the beginning! God's superabundant love overflowed in the act of creation. God did not create us and then love us. Rather, God loved us so

much that he brought us into existence. This love is shown in the ways the earth cares for us and the joy we find in simply waking each morning.

The second nature of Aquinas' view on grace grows for us in the form of a gift from God. Not only does God (as John tell us) create all things through Jesus, but God gives us Jesus as a gift as well.

That is the gift from above that Paul speaks of – the gift of the Christ child coming down to be with us. It is a gift we open every year and one that, like Mary, we can treasure in our hearts and ponder the glory of it all.

There is an extravagance in God's gifts beyond the practical or the necessary or the needed, a superabundance in God's miracles that are meant to show the superabundance of God's love. In the feeding of the five thousand, there are 12 baskets of leftovers. In the Wedding at Cana, there is 150 gallons of supremely fine wine Jesus creates. In the parable of the vineyard owner he pays people far more than they are worth, the story of a king forgiving millions of dollars in debt, and the Father giving his foolish son his half of the estate and, even after having squandered it, throws him a grand feast upon his return.

The most astonishing act of extravagance, of course, is the gift of the Son himself and the manner in which he showed his loved, as John tells us, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16).

For God did not have to do it this way.

We say that the cross was necessary, but I don't think it was. God is in charge and God is not beholden to do things in a certain way. God could have simply forgiven us without all the muss and fuss of birth, death, and resurrection.

But because God's love is beyond measure, God does it in the most persuasive and powerful manner possible. The birth, the life, and cross are the greatest acts of God's superabundant love. Because he loved us so much he wanted to go the extra, extra mile to do everything for us in the most lavish, most loving, most giving, most personal way.

This supreme, lavish, love leads us to the third act of grace – our lives of gratitude. Our response to God's grace, at this time of year, is to share the gift by giving gifts.

But we must admit it has gotten off kilter. If there is a war on the holiness of Christmas, then we have lost it, not because of our enemies, but because we have capitulated and allowed the sacred act of gift giving to be a commercial enterprise, rather than a spiritual one.

Biblically, gifts are not toys to entertain or candles to decorate; they are not simply for delight or pleasure, but meant to express the heart of the giver. In the gift of Jesus, we see the heart of God.

And so, in awe of this gift, some brought gifts of their own to him – gifts of gold, of frankincense, and of myrrh. No, this was not the equivalent of giving Jesus a treasury bond and some potpourri! These gifts were objects endowed with profound meaning.

So important were these gifts, they followed a star for an unknown number of nights, willing to risk everything, to deliver them.

The magi's gifts not only give us insight into Jesus' character, but they would have helped shaped Jesus self-understanding. As Mary or Joseph told him the tale of the Magi's visit and the nature of the gifts they brought, it would have been an opportunity to reflect on his purpose and calling. Why the Gold? Why the Frankincense? Why the myrrh?

Jesus would have come to the same conclusion we do. The magi's gifts of gold represented Christ's kingship, the frankincense which was used in fragrant offerings to God represented his holiness,

and the myrrh was a burial spice which represented his sacrificial death.

Because Biblical gifts are filled with meaning and are a means to discover and exalt God's glory, they shape our very being and determine our destiny. That's the power of a gift!

When Wendy was pregnant with Matthew, in the midst of that joy, we discovered her father was stricken with cancer. At first he battled it, taking every treatment he could. But as the months passed by, he lost his battle. Over the years he had been able to spend special moments with our daughter Liz, so that she would have loving memories of hiking and fishing with her Grandpa Hoadley. But Matthew was newly born and would not remember a thing.

So, Grandpa Hoadley decided to give Matthew a special gift. A 2001 Port. This was not just any bottle, it was of supreme vintage and chosen to be perfectly aged when Matthew turns 21. Matthew never knew him. But that bottle sits on our book shelf and Matthew has seen it for the last 17 years. And for all those years, it has been an opportunity for him to ask questions about Grandpa Hoadley. It has been a chance for Wendy to share stories about her father and what made him special. It has been a chance for Matthew to know that, though they never knew each other, he is still loved by him. Now that is a gift!

It's hard to know God personally, so God sent his only Son so that the whole world will know they are loved by him. It's as simple as that.

Amen.