

December 2, 2018

The Gifts of Christmas  
*The Gift of Hope*  
Matthew 1:18-21

**Opening words:** Christmas wouldn't be the same without gift giving. Many have traced the tradition back to the story of the Magi, Matthew 2:1-12. It is a story that is both traditional and Biblical. Tradition tells us there were three Magi or kings. Tradition also tells us their names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. The Bible tells us they presented the infant Jesus with three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Each gift represented some aspect of Jesus's life. The gold was a gift for a king. The frankincense was a gift for a priest. The myrrh was a gift for one who was going to die. I do not know what happened to those gifts, but I do know gift giving is a big part of the holiday season. I do not know of anyone who doesn't give gifts. I do not know anyone who doesn't want to receive a gift.

Today, I will begin my new five-part sermon series, *The Gifts of Christmas*. I am going to look at the spiritual gifts Jesus gives us, once he becomes our Lord and Savior. We are reminded of them each Sunday morning, as we light the advent candles. They are the gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace. Without Jesus, none of those things exist. On Christmas Eve, we will look at the gift of Christ himself. Today, our Gospel reading is Matthew 1:18-21. Let me call this message *The Gift of Hope*.

**Matthew 1:18-21** This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup> Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

<sup>20</sup> But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup> She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

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Desmond Tutu (born 1931) is a South African cleric. He once said, "*Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.*" How many times have you found yourself living in the dark? If that question makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

I love this story. There were identical twins, who were nothing alike. One was a hope-filled optimist, the other was a dark pessimist. Their parents were so concerned about their sons, they took them to their family doctor. She came up with a plan. She said, "On Christmas day, give the pessimist a brand-new bicycle and give the optimist a box of manure." The parents agreed to the plan. On Christmas morning, the pessimist got a

brand-new state of the art bicycle. When he saw it, he said, "Oh great, I'll probably crash and break my leg." When the optimist opened his box of manure, he was a little confused at first, then he started to smile. He ran outside and said, "With that much manure there must be a pony!" Don't tell me attitude isn't important. Have you noticed our world seems to have a surplus of pessimists and a shortage of optimists? That is because our world has a shortage of hope.

You really can't blame people. Our world is filled with so many problems. The other night I asked my google search engine, what are the greatest problems facing our world? These are the answers I received. They came from the World Economic Forum.

1. Climate change
2. Large scale conflict/wars
3. Inequality (income, discrimination)
4. Poverty
5. Religious conflicts
6. Government corruption
7. Food and water security
8. Lack of education
9. Safety
10. Lack of economic opportunity

That is a depressing list. So, I asked my google search engine another question:

What are the greatest problems facing America? These are the answers I received. These came from the Gallup Research Group.

1. Poor leadership
2. Healthcare
3. The economy
4. Immigration
5. National unity
6. Unemployment
7. Racism
8. Terrorism
9. Ethics and morals
10. North Korea

I find those lists to be depressing. Each one of those problems is massive and complex. When I look at that list, I find myself becoming a pessimist; a little less hopeful. Clare Boothe Luce (1903-1987) was an American author, politician and U.S. Ambassador. She once said, "*There are no hopeless situations; there are only people who have grown hopeless.*" As a Christian people we should always have hope, because we have God. If you can agree with that statement, say, "**Amen!**" Today, I want to help you recover the power of hope in your life. Our scripture reading for today models for us how to remain hopeful. Let us look at the scripture lesson together.

We find ourselves today in the first chapter of Matthew. It was written by the former tax collector and disciple, Matthew, about the year 70. He wrote this Gospel to prove to the Jews that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it is the most Jewish in nature. That point is in the opening words. Prior to our reading, Matthew's genealogy traces Jesus's ancestry back to Abraham. In other words, Jesus was a pure Jew. That was important to his people and to his generation.

Our scripture reading for today begins very matter-of-factly. *This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about.* I'll bet you have heard the story in the past. His mother was named Mary and was pledged to a man named Joseph. Mary was a young woman, probably a teenager, from the town of Nazareth. Joseph was older, a carpenter by trade, from the town of Bethlehem. There is no reason to think their marriage was not arranged by their families. This is where the confusion begins. In order to clarify the text, replace the word "pledged", with the word "engaged". In traditional America, couples date, get engaged, then marry. There is nothing legally binding about a contemporary engagement. Not so, in their time. In their time, the engagement period was legally binding. For a one-year period, the couple was married in every way, except sexually. Mary and Joseph had never had sex, which makes her pregnancy hard to explain. Unlike in our time, in their time morals were a big deal. Joseph is in a hopeless situation. If he marries Mary, he brings disgrace on his own name. If he breaks the engagement, he places Mary in danger. If the law was carried out, she could be stoned to death. God places everyone in this story in an awkward situation. Yet, Joseph finds light in this dark situation and models for us how to remain hopeful. So, what did Joseph do, that we need to do, to remain hopeful? If you are ready to look at Joseph's model, say, "**Amen!**"

In 1870, the Methodists in Indiana gathered at a small college for their Annual Conference. The president of that small college addressed the lay and clergy delegates. He said, they were living in amazing times. They were on the edge of revolutionizing the world. He caught the imagination of everyone present. Later, the Presiding Bishop of that Annual Conference, a man named Milton Wright, asked the president what changes were coming. The president said, "Someday man will be able to fly." Bishop Wright dismissed those words as idle chatter. He responded by saying, "Flight was reserved for birds and the angels in heaven." When he returned home, he told his wife and his two sons, Orville and Wilbur, about the president's comments. The bishop dismissed those words, but his sons, Orville and Wilbur, heard the president's words, and were challenged. Bishop Wright was so close, yet he was so far away. Maybe that is our story too. God is trying to communicate with us, but we just aren't listening. That takes us back to Joseph.

**First, Joseph heard God's voice.** In a very real way, Joseph was lucky. An unnamed angel came to him in a dream. In our time, we like to think of angels as protectors. In the Bible, they are messengers. The angel tells Joseph three important things. First, he is to take Mary as his wife. The child inside of Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit. It

is a virgin birth. Second, the child will be a boy. Third, they will name that boy Jesus. This is not the only place in the Bible where God communicates with people through dreams. Has God ever communicated with you in a dream, but you forgot the dream? This is a better question: Have you ever stopped to consider that God is trying to communicate with us in a variety of ways, but we refuse to listen? If you promise to be more attentive to God's voice, say, "**Amen!**" The first thing Joseph did to remain hopeful was to listen to God. The second thing Joseph did to remain hopeful was to obey God.

One of the great names in the world of missions is David Livingstone (1813-1873). He served in Africa for years. Once, he sent a letter back to England requesting help. A missionary society wrote back with these words. "*Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to help you.*" Livingstone responded with these words: "*If you have men who will come only if they know there are good roads, then I don't want them. I want men who will come if there are no roads at all.*" What was David Livingstone saying? He was saying he was looking for those who were truly committed. It isn't just true of David Livingstone, it is also true of God. How committed are you to God? That takes us back to Joseph.

**Second, Joseph obeyed God's word.** Do you remember the story? The unnamed angels came to Joseph in a dream and told him to do two things. Joseph did both things. First, in the face of a scoffing society, he discredited his own name and took Mary as his wife. Second, when the baby boy was born, he didn't name him Joseph. He named him Jesus. It is important that you know what the name Jesus means. It means "to deliver" or "rescue." The scripture says, his name is Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. That doesn't mean a lot to our generation because we see ourselves as good people, who can save ourselves by our good works. That is not the story in Jesus's generation. They saw themselves as sinners, who would be lost without hope. They longed for a Savior because they longed for hope. If you promise to be more obedient to God's word, say, "**Amen!**" The first thing Joseph did to remain hopeful was to listen to God. The second thing Joseph did to remain hopeful was to obey God. The third thing Joseph did to remain hopeful was to trust God's power.

Do you remember the name Terry Anderson (born 1947)? He was the Chief Middle East Correspondent for the Associated Press. He was kidnapped in Beirut on March 16, 1985. His kidnappers held him hostage for nearly seven years. It was an extremely difficult time, and he showed incredible strength. Once released, he was interviewed countless times and was asked countless questions. Someone asked him the question, did you ever lose hope? He answered with these words, "*I had some blue moments. However, I will always be thankful for my Bible. I read it every day. It is a book of hope. It taught me so much about hope. It taught me to do the best I could do on that day and trust God with the future.*"

Maybe that is why there is a shortage of hope in our society. We spend too much time worrying and not enough time trusting God, who is writing the future. Joseph had hope, because he did the best he could do on that day and trusted God with the future. I'll bet you can do the same. Do you remember what Desmond Tutu once said? He said, "*Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness.*" And, all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"