

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Luke 1:26-38

Rev. Tyler Amundson

December 17, 2017

Unwrapping Christmas: Unwanted Gift

Worship Opener

Good morning! It is great to be in worship with you on this third week of advent. We've been moving through our series "Unwrapping Christmas" and we've been rediscovering the missing reason for the season.

In week one, we got out the Christmas decorations and found surprises within, just like Zechariah and Elizabeth did when they learned they were going to have a baby.

Last week we discussed our "unwrap technique" as we looked at Joseph's reaction to Mary's unexpected pregnancy.

Rather than condemn her, walk away or do what society would have mandated, Joseph unwraps the news in his own unique way accepting the gift of Jesus.

Today, we look at the "Unwanted Gift" as we look at Mary's story.

Let me ask you a question: What's the best gift you've ever been given? Just shout it out.

OK, what about the worst gift you've been given?

How many of you have ever been to one of those office Christmas parties where you exchange gag gifts? You know, those white elephant gift exchanges? How about those ugly sweaters? Have you gotten one of those before?

The interesting thing about those exchanges is that, when one person receives a gift that may be unwanted, another person may steal it away and be very happy to take it home.

When the angel tells Mary that she is pregnant, it wasn't exactly the gift she was looking for. In the society Mary was a part of, this gift would create unimaginable challenges.

But Mary, accepts the gift, and even embraces it.

Friends, Jesus is the lasting gift you've been waiting for. He is the most perfect gift you can receive. The more you unwrap this gift and come accept it, the more full and complete your life will be.

Let's worship the God who offers us the perfect gift.

Sermon

Growing up I always had this one family friend who would give us these very well thought out gifts, that didn't cost a lot and were always things I was not sure I needed. I would receive desk calendars that weren't my style, camo jackets and I don't wear camo, and games that might have been fun for someone 2 years younger than me. These gifts would fall in the category of unwanted.

How many of you get a few of these Christmas gifts from time to time?

The truth is life is full of unwanted gifts and the story of God's love is chalk full of them. Take for example our scripture today. Our scripture today comes from the gospel of Luke, and is part of that story of Christmas we hear each year:

Luke 1:26-38 Common English Bible (CEB)

²⁶ When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ When the angel came to her, he said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!" ²⁹ She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you." ³¹ Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. ³³ He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom."

³⁴ Then Mary said to the angel, "How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"

³⁵ The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son. ³⁶ Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled ‘unable to conceive’ is now six months pregnant. ³⁷ Nothing is impossible for God.”

³⁸ Then Mary said, “I am the Lord’s servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

First, as always you have to love the angels gumption in every one of these stories, especially Mary’s. Here is this angel saying, do not be afraid and yet I would say I don’t know a person alive who would not be somewhat afraid at the siting of a heavenly being. Then the phrase seems ever bigger because of the news presented to Mary. She is pregnant bearing a child of God. Average parents’ fears upon just knowing they are pregnant with child, then combine that with heavenly expectations. Can you imagine mixed emotions of excitement and fear for Mary of wondering ability to fulfill your human role of caring for a child and knowing this child belongs to God? Mary’s situation is like that of any parent compounded by its enormity, and we must also name her position in her culture as a challenge too.

Mary could be stoned to death for being pregnant before marriage in the culture she lives, and additionally she is a woman with no status in her culture. Mary as woman is not empowered to change her world and yet her God has asked her to do this thing.

In the devotion, *When God Came Down*, Jim Harnish shares this revelation:

“A French phrase caught my attention in the writings of Thomas Merton. Even poorly pronounced, *le point vierge* sounds better in French than its English translation ‘the virgin point.’ Merton defined *le point vierge* as the ‘point at which I can meet God in a real and experimental

contact.’ He said, ‘This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.’” (Christine Bochen, *Thomas Merton: The Essential Writings*, pp. 60-61)

Mary is usually described as the Virgin mother of Jesus. This distinction often carries with it a strange scientific inner debate about what exactly “virgin” entails. Virgin as a term carries with it a strange idea of purity, a sense of something un-touched, innocent, or somehow purer than that which is the opposite. On a snowy morning, the “virgin snow” might be the snow that is untouched by creature or vehicle, somehow better because it has not been reached yet by something which disturbs it.

Yet, the *le point vierge* that Harnish uses as described by Thomas Merton somehow changes that understanding. The virgin point becomes instead an interaction with God that is experimental and new. New and experimental contact is often messy and not some perfect interaction. Mary’s story is anything, but perfect in the sense of how a king should come into the world. An unwed young woman finds herself pregnant and not in a place of wealth, and with a significant other who has to decide whether he still wants to be with her. Yet, the story of Mary focuses on this virgin point by showing Mary’s willingness to be open to God’s love entering the world through her. The story of God enters the world in the all the wrong ways, and yet the gospel writer uses the word for purity to describe it. I think the gospel writer uses the word not prove Mary’s sexual purity, but her willingness to be part of God’s working in the world.

A few years ago, I was in Denver. I love riding public transit when I am in Denver, it makes for great people watching. A young man strolled up to me at one of the stops, in a way that made me think he was trying to sell me something. He pointed to my clergy collar and asked me if I was a priest. I clumsily shared that I was a pastor not a priest(as if it mattered to him). He asked me, “Does drinking make me a bad person?” I had to stop for a minute. I immediately thought in my head, NO! However, he asked me as a clergy person, so he must be looking

for guidance. I responded by asking, “Is it causing a problem for you?” He shared with me that it was not him, in a way that made me wonder if that was really true. However, what I noticed in that moment was that I was going to be unable to support this man in any form of holistic healing.

This man in a moment was looking for insight that would take a relationship to offer change in his life. Instead of offering the train stop advice he was looking for, I told him about a friend’s ministry in Denver that held worship in Bar’s and suggested he might want to look to get his question answered by that ministry. Then I said, “Drinking is not a sin, the problems that excessive or disease level drinking can cause us to be separate from our loved ones and God.”

For this young man on the platform I could have offered the joy of Christianity and tried to save him with a single prayer and a sendoff. Instead I chose to offer an unwanted gift like Mary was offered. That sometimes our joy comes from understanding our possible failings, and then choosing to be in relationship with God and others in a way we never imagined.

Raniero Cantalamessa [writes](#), “One needs to be aware of the cross to speak of [Mary’s] joy and to understand what is being talked about. Suffering puts us in contact with the supreme action of God in history, which is the cross of Christ. The cross is what keeps Christian joy sober.”¹

Remember my unwanted gifts from my friend, I think sometimes the sobering thing I have to remember is many people go their whole life without receiving an unwanted gift. And the young men on the train platform go years without hearing unexpected messages of hope. Sometimes the thing that keeps us from accepting the unwanted gift of

¹ <http://mailchi.mp/ad048fd753e3/sober-joy>

Christmas is failing to recognize how God is blessing us in the gifting of the unwanted.

Mary is in a vulnerable place in her culture and her joy comes rooted in this unwanted gift by recognizing the risk God was taking by sending a small child into the world, a child that would carry a deeper burden than even she would have. That in her vulnerable state God could and would choose to invite her to offer the love and care needed to foster God's love into the world. Not only that the risk she was taking by carrying the child within her in a world that was unsure, unsafe, and unready for love of that magnitude.

We cannot underestimate the mix of emotions, but the gospel writer in look tries to embody these. Right after the passage I have already this morning Mary breaks into a song, that demonstrates the powerful mix of emotions she has toward the gift of this unexpected gift she would bear for us all.

This morning I am going to invite us to listen to a song based on the words of Mary's song from the gospel of Luke, a strong reminder that Unexpected gifts come to turn the world upside down.

My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in my savior
Who has looked on my lowliness with favor--
And all people will call me blessed.

God has been good, oh my Lord has been good to me.
And holy is the Lord's name.

God's mercy is for those who fear the Lord
From generation to generation.
The Lord has shown strength, has scattered the proud
In the thoughts of their hearts.

The Lord brings down the powerful.
The Lord lifts up the lowly.
My Lord fills the hungry with good things
And sends the rich away with nothing.
The Lord has helped Israel,
Remembering all of God's mercy,
Remembering the promise made to Abraham,
To him and to all who follow.²

Mike was not a guy who liked Christmas. In fact, at some point he had thrown off the idea that receiving gifts was a good idea. Saying something like, “In my day when we got a gift it really mattered. Now it is all about people wanting more, wanting the right thing, and getting the right thing. I am done with gifts and getting them, I don’t want anything cheap cologne, cheap clothing, knick knacks that fill my basement, and ugly sweaters. Until people recognize what Christmas is all about, I don’t want a thing.”

Nan, Mike’s wife of some 48 years, was worried about Mike. Worried, that Mike was going to retire only to spend his time in his favorite armchair eating, watching old sitcoms or an occasional game, and living the life of “recliner passivity.” She was worried this cantankerous nature would take over his whole existence and that even during the Christmas season, when surely he could be generous man she knew him to be, he would instead be a Grinch. Then she got an idea.

² from [The Luke Canticles](#), released November 27, 2013

Susannah Thorngate: lead vocal

Colby Maddox: fiddle

Steve Thorngate: guitar, piano, vocal

Ed Hodges: bass

Jason Toth: drums

Josiah Thorngate: vocal

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The idea came when Nan and Mike were watching their kids at a wrestling match. There was one underprivileged school there and you could tell who they were. They had faded uniforms, threadbare t-shirts, sweats that were too big or too small. All of this stood out as they were overwhelmed in the competition by the schools that were more wealthy and had matching uniforms.

“Just look at those boys,” Mike bemoaned, “it just isn’t right. This sport may be all these boys really have. Sure they jump up after losing, but being beaten down again and again, it will take the heart right out of you.”

Nan did something different that Christmas. She tucked a single envelop with Mike’s name on it between ornaments on the tree. On Christmas morning after all the other presents were opened. Nan feigned ignorance, went to the tree and as if surprised said, “Why there is one more present. And, sweetheart, it has your name on it.”

Mike mumbled about not wanting anything that year, and Nan said, “Maybe you’ll like this.”

Mike took the envelope, eyed it suspiciously, and opened it. Inside was a single index card. On it a pledge typed out that said, “During the coming year, Nan would devote her considerable seamstress skills to making uniforms for that underprivileged team of wrestlers. Mike read it and mumbled, “Well at least its not peanut brittle.”

Nan held to her word and in January she got all her supplies out, got fabric and sat down to start the work. She sketched out her plans, after a while Mike wandered over and glanced at her work. He shook his head, “No, no, no, wrestling

uniforms don't look like that, the colors are wrong. And how do you know the sizes of the players?"

"Well I was wondering about that, could you help me?" Nan asked.

Faster than a takedown Mike was off. He was at the school measuring the kids, to the fabric store to get the material. He joined nan in separating fabric, laying things out, separating backs and fronts and pinning numbers into place.

Of course it involved more trips to the school. The team was beside themselves at this idea of new uniforms, they wanted to be part of the project. Soon they were selling chocolate bars to buy new headgear and scheduling twice a day workouts to get ready for the next meet. Mike and Nan chaperoned away meets, took the youth to see college level wrestling. Mike even took a day as assistant coach, doing the best he could to keep up.

A year passed and Mike has so much fun that the next year he was poking around the Christmas tree. He toyed, "I wonder if there might be something for me this year."

Thus started a family tradition that wound up in a script acted out each Christmas. Nan placing an envelope lodged in the branches of the tree. Then when all the other presents were opened the two would fane surprise over the last gift, and do their dance of finding out what it might be. Mike would jump up when Nan would find the card and even joke, "I hope it is not peanut brittle."

They helped design a playground at a boys home, and organized car washed to fund it and volunteers to organize construction. Got a group of neighbors to build birdhouses

and feeding stations for a local marshland project. And another they took on city hall with a band of local activists who wanted to take a vacant lot and transform it into a vibrant community garden.

Year after year, Mike and Nan carried on. Simple acts of kindness took root throughout the city. Each act germinated the seed of another envelope. Nan would later say, "Those were the best years of our lives." The town came alive and not only that Mike did too.

One year, just a few days before Christmas, Mike suffered a stroke and died. The family came from all over and gathered to attend a Christmas Eve funeral. Afterwards Nan did as she always did, despite the pestering to take it easy, she cared for others, served food, and then rebuffed early attempts by family to send her to bed.

Finally, everyone else was asleep and Nan put that last present under the tree and switched off the lights in the room. The glow of the Christmas tree came and Nan stopped.

Memories adorned the tree...babies first Christmas, blue bulbs from their first Christmas when they could afford nothing, a Statue of Liberty from a trip Mike loved that they took to New York. All of these fragments passed before Nan's eyes.

Then she got up opened a drawer pulled out a white envelope she had put there several weeks before. On it said, "For Mike."

Then after staring at it for a while she slipped it into the tree saying, "This is for you, sweetheart. This is for you." Unplugged the tree and went up to her room.

The next morning she got up and saw she had slept well past when she should have for having grandkids on Christmas morning. She heard one mother downstairs say, “Don’t worry grandma will be down soon, then we can open presents.”

Nan came down the stairs and saw her family, mostly up now moving around the space. Then she stopped. She looked at the tree and there in the tree were dozens of white envelopes buried in its branches.

Each son, daughter, in-law, grandchild had placed their envelopes in the tree. Pledges of projects for Mike, in his memory. Somehow the grief eased, if even just for a moment, she longed for Mike. Yet, she could see the envelopes continuing into the future.

And Nan knew how pleased Mike would be. He was, after all, a man who loved Christmas.³

Le point vierge, the virgin point, Mary’s story and the unwanted gifts of our lives remind us not to get caught up in who we are. Instead to let the tug of Christmas pull on our hearts. We have to be willing to have “sober joy” to share love with others to feel the touch of God in new and experimental ways. By being open to how God might use us, we have to get out of the way enough for God’s love, the unwanted Gift to be present through us.

³ <https://www.upperroom.org/disciplines/en-2017-12-10> I have also heard it performed live by Frank Rogers Jr. who tells it much better than I. Thanks for this great story.

This year let the unwanted gifts from God and from others come to us. And remember they might be exactly the gift we need to let into our lives to help us bear God's love in this world.

May we this year be open to God, be willing to interact with God's love in ways we did not know we had in us. May we take the unwanted gift and bear it as a sign of God's love, the missing reason for the season.

Amen