

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

¹⁰ *He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

¹⁴ *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:9-14)*

Don't Lose This Gift!

When my kids were little, Legos were very popular in my house. One year for Christmas, we got the boys some little Lego bulldozers. Of course, when we open presents, there's a flurry of wrapping paper. When it gets to the point where you can't see anywhere else in the room, it's time to get a garbage bag and start clearing it out. Somehow, those little bulldozers disappeared. My guess is they got thrown into one of those garbage bags. Except that I emptied them and went through all the paper and packaging and I still couldn't find them. Now, fortunately, the kids got other gifts that year so there weren't a lot of tears, although my wife and I were kind of frustrated. But, in the end, if you have to lose a Christmas present, better one that won't be missed than one that would be a tragedy to lose.

The gospel lesson for today points out that God's Old Testament people lost his Christmas gift. And it wasn't a Lego bulldozer. It wasn't the \$200 Lego Millennium Falcon or the \$1000 Lego Star Destroyer. It wasn't a diamond necklace or tickets to the Superbowl or any treasure of this life. They lost Jesus and so they lost the eternal life he came to give them. That was a terrible tragedy for them. And it's a warning to us. Today is a day of joy and celebration. But don't forget why. **Don't lose this gift!**

I.

We usually think of gifts in terms of things, not people. But new parents certainly know what a gift a baby is. Even old parents like my wife and I still consider our children to be gifts of God. Jesus is a gift God gave, and not just because he was a newborn baby. The gift God gave us in Bethlehem shines the light of God's love to every age of believer. My friends, **don't lose this gift! He gives light to the world.**

Light is a tremendously important image in the Bible. We're a little spoiled today because light is so easy for us. You just flip a switch and you have it. Recently, I've been reminded that it doesn't have to be quite so easy. We have a floor lamp in our living room that's on the fritz. When you turn the knob to turn it on, the light flashes on and then it goes off again. You have to play with it to get that knob to just the right spot for the light to stay on. Sometimes, it'll take me ten or twelve tries to get it to work. Sometimes, I get frustrated and give up. My wife and I looked for a replacement a few weeks ago, but we didn't find anything that we liked, so we're going to have to try again.

Even that doesn't illustrate how difficult light was in the ancient world. If you want to get a handle on it, you'd have to leave suburban Detroit and go someplace where there are no streetlights and there is no electricity. You'd have to leave your flashlights and cell phones and batteries behind. You'd even have to be without the nice factory made candles that we have today. In the ancient world, torches and oil lamps and smoky homemade candles were all you had. They were expensive and clunky to use. Compared to what you and I are used to, they didn't come close to doing the job right. But in that world, huddling around an oil lamp so that you could at least see each other's faces and possibly do a little work was a powerful picture of the church gathered around Jesus Christ. Beyond the circle of light lay shadows and then total darkness – darkness that Jesus came to drive back.

What is that darkness? It starts with ignorance. We don't know God or Christ on our own. No one comes out of the womb with Jesus' name on their lips. If we don't teach our children to know Christ, they will live in darkness, without knowledge of his love or faith in his promises. But why is that darkness? Because of sin. Sin is rebellion against God. Without sin, there would be no hurt or sorrow in this world. There would be no violence or enemies. So without sin, darkness wouldn't mean fear or evil. But once sin came, darkness became the perfect metaphor for sin because evil hides in the darkness and it reaches out for us. Muggers step out of the

shadows. Predators hunt at night. Sin is the ultimate predator, the ultimate robber because it kills us. That is the ultimate form of darkness: death. Followed immediately by hell.

But Jesus is the light of the world. John says, **“The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.”** That’s the gift God gave us at Christmas. The manger of Bethlehem is a spotlight that lights up the night and drives away all fear and darkness. Jesus didn’t do that just for the Jewish people. Jesus came because he loves us all and he wants all people to be saved. You and I have gathered here this morning because Christ’s light reached our hearts and changed them. How did it do that? Through the gospel message. That’s how the light shines today.

On Judgment Day, we’ll see the light of Christ with our physical eyes. We’ll see the glory of heaven and eternal life. But right now, that light only shines in our hearts and in our minds. We visualize that baby that was born in Bethlehem and we know who he really is: the Son of God made flesh to save us. The very Lord who created the heavens and this earth has come to live on that earth so that we will live with him. He has come to conquer our sin and free us from death. He has come to light up the path to heaven and lead us out of the darkness of hell. That all began at the manger of Bethlehem.

What a tragedy it would be to lose that light. At Christmas time, it’s so easy to get caught up in so many other things and lose the joy of this holiday because we forget to think about its real meaning. And life goes on, it’s so easy to be so busy and so committed to taking care of our families and doing our jobs that we let our faith drift. We reach the point where we only come to church on Christmas and Easter and eventually, not even then. In the end, we lose our faith – we lose the light of Christ. What a tragedy that would be, because Jesus came to save us from death and hell. But my friends, Jesus is still the Savior. And no matter how distracted we’ve been this holiday season, no matter how far we’ve drifted from his word or how many years it’s been since we came to church, Jesus still took on human flesh so that he could die and pay for our sin. He still suffered all that we owe. He still rose from the dead and conquered all that we are guilty of. Jesus forgives you. Jesus is your light. He lights up the only path to heaven: trust in his forgiveness. My friends, cling to that light!

II.

Some gifts make us happy. Some gifts we remember for a long time. And sometimes, we get a gift that truly changes our lives. When a young man gives a young lady a ring, that gift changes their lives – hopefully in a very joyful way. It probably means children. It usually also means becoming part of a whole new extended family. That young lady may have a new person that she calls “dad” and another that she calls “mom.” In a sense, that gift is a kind of adoption into her husband’s family, just her family adopts the young man who is about to marry her. The image John uses is a little different, but the point is the same. God’s gift makes us a part of his family. My friends, **don’t lose this gift! He makes us children of God.**

The truth is, Israel didn’t just drift away from God. They didn’t lose his gift. They threw it away. John says, **“He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.”** For 1500 years God had promised to send this Savior. He nurtured their faith and renewed their hopes. Finally, on that first Christmas night, the promised Messiah was born – and angels announced his birth. John the Baptist announced his ministry. Jesus did miracles and proclaimed a powerful message. But the vast majority of his people rejected him. He wasn’t the gift they wanted. Have you ever given someone a gift and they immediately made clear that they didn’t like it? How did you feel? That’s what Israel did to God. They didn’t want a carpenter’s son who preached and taught and healed the sick. They didn’t want a Savior who only promised to forgive their sins. They wanted a king and general to make them a mighty nation again. They threw God’s gift away.

But God didn’t let that stop him. John says, **“Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”** God’s gift changes us. It adopts us into his family. So in the manger of Bethlehem, God wasn’t just giving us his Son. He was giving us himself, making himself our true Father. Could there be a greater gift than that?

But why do we need to be adopted? Isn’t God the Father of all he created? What keeps anyone out of his family? Sin. I said before that no one is born with Jesus’ name on their lips but it’s worse than that. We’re all born sinners and enemies of God. We like to believe that babies are innocent and of course, there’s a sense in which they are. Babies are selfish but they don’t know any better. Nothing angers me more than hearing a news report about someone who hurt a baby because they wouldn’t stop crying. That’s all they knew how to do. But it doesn’t change the fact that babies are selfish. If we parents don’t teach them different, they will

grow up selfish. And there is no “age of accountability” when they suddenly become responsible for their own sins. Anyone who has parented knows how early and how often sin shows itself. All of us who are honest about our own childhoods realize just how much sin our parents put up with.

That sin separates us from God. He is the Father of all creation and he does want every baby to be a part of his family. But sin makes us rebels and runaways. And the way we were born there is nothing in our heart that ever wants to come back. But God claims us anyway. He sent Jesus to be the runaway and the rebel in our place. And then he punished him like we all deserve. That baby that was laid in a manger was born to die for our sins. At the same time, God sent Jesus to be the perfect child of God that we can never be. He loved and honored his Father every day of his life. God used those two things to adopt us. He put all our rebellion on Jesus. He put all Jesus’ righteousness and obedience on us. And now we are his children. John says that when God gave us faith in Jesus he gave us the right to become the children of God. Because of Jesus, we have the right to insist in God’s courtroom that we aren’t sinners anymore. We are God’s perfect and beloved children. That is the gift God gave us in Bethlehem.

Don’t lose that gift. Don’t let it get mixed up in the used wrapping paper and packaging of this life. Don’t let all the distractions and cares and worries of this season or any other season get between you and Jesus. God has given you the greatest gift you will ever have: Jesus who has forgiven all your sins and who promises you eternal life. Hang on to that gift until you see him with your own eyes. Amen.