

God's Christmas Gift

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Calvary United Methodist Church, Normal, Illinois — Advent I, November 28, 1976

***Editorial Note:** Dr. Richard D. Leonard (1901-1976) was the father of Dr. Richard C. Leonard of Laudemont Ministries. He was a United Methodist minister and was retired from the faculty of Illinois Wesleyan University, where he had served as Professor of Religion and then Professor of History. This was the last sermon he preached; he sat down after delivering it, slumped over with a stroke, and passed away on December 1, 1976.*

Sometimes I ask myself whether Christmas or Easter is the most important day in our church year. Easter is that glorious day that God made by the resurrection of Our Lord — that day which commemorates the central distinguishing mark of Christianity. Many great religious teachers like Gautama Buddha, Confucius, and Socrates taught and stood nobly for just about the same ethical ideals as Jesus. This used to bother me a great deal. That was before I came to realize that our religion is not a set of moral principles and that Christianity is not following the teachings of Jesus but appropriating Him in mystic union at the center of one's nature so that, in the words of Paul, "it is not I but Christ liveth in me." You can never say "It is not I but Socrates liveth in me" because Socrates never rose from the dead. Of course there would be no Christianity without Easter.

But, after all, Easter is but the climax or substantiation of what happened at Christmas. The basic fact is not so much this substantiation as it is the coming of Christ in the first place. This is really *the* day, the day God sent Christ.

There is an awful lot of sentimental drivel about Christmas as there is about many other special days like this. We get all thrilled up about Santa Claus with Donner and Blitzen and the rest. We deck the halls with boughs of holly, we put wreaths in our windows, secure that descendent of the sacred oak of the ancient Germans known as a Christmas tree, ring the changes on the same old half dozen Christmas carols, and all that — and don't misunderstand me, I do not imply that we shouldn't do these things. They are very nice and often very beautiful. But they are subsidiary matters. I suppose every special day has special ways in which it should be celebrated. But what good will it do for a man who is under the judgment of God for sin to sing Christmas carols?

This is exactly the predicament that you and I are in. Christmas is the day when God made provision for us to escape from that predicament. Too often our attention is on a tiny baby in a manger who, except as a promise of what is to be, can scarcely do this for us. As the poet said, "Thou earnest, a tiny baby thing, to make a woman cry."

Christmas is the day that dramatizes to us the terrific drama of repentance and salvation. As Paul said, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." There is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about this drama. For example, most people think of sin as doing bad deeds, but that is not what the Bible says it is. It is a state that man is in, that state being out of touch with God where He cannot get at you to guide you; if He could you wouldn't do the bad deeds. Man was created by God for a purpose. (Do you think God would create anything without a purpose?) It is the nature of man to reflect the image of God. Instead, man goes out

on his own, doing what he, himself, purposes and often has the temerity to ask God to come along and help him, bring him “peace of mind” and all that.

This is why the Bible, over and over again, thinks of idolatry as the center of sin, for idolatry is the worship of a false god; and when a man worships himself and his own purposes he is idolatrous. Hence a man stands under the judgment of God, just as the thing that you make that doesn't fulfil your purpose for it. stands under your judgment. And when God judges you and finds you wanting His wrath is upon you. What the Bible means by the wrath of God is simply the inevitable consequence of trying to live life apart from the wishes and guidance of the Creator, who is the only one who knows the score. I often say that the modern symbol of the wrath of God on man's estrangement — on man's sin — is a long row of psychiatrists' couches.

But God has done something about it. I sometimes wonder why in the world He should bother any more about man, the way man has turned out in view of what God planned. But, of course, I cannot understand how far love will go. Besides, God is determined that His creation will turn out to be successful. At any rate, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him shall have eternal life”. And when you really believe in Someone and give yourself wholly and utterly to Him you can really begin to live on a eternal basis.

We have many times been accustomed to use the phrase “Christ is the answer.” It has been part of the propaganda for Christian proposals, plans and programs. But perhaps we have not delved very deeply into the depths of its fundamental significance. Is it really true that Christ *is* the answer to earthly conditions and problems and also personal ones?

I have often used the illustration derived from Arthur Millers's play *The Death of a Salesman*, including from this pulpit. You remember that Willie Lohman glorified in being a great salesman who made many friends. But, somehow or other, he was not fulfilled. He enjoyed life most when he was puttering around his house and garden. Finally, he committed suicide and his funeral was held in a large place at his request so all his friends could come — but almost no one came. In the postlude of the play his son Biff remarked that his father had ghe wrong dreams so he didn't know who he was. Who was he? A son of God sent into the world for a specific purpose. Willie never sought to find this purpose, so Christ could not be the answer to his frustrated life; for in the play he apparently had no religion. Christmas would then have no significance for him. He lived in sin.

But Christ is not only the answer to the set of a person's life and career, but likewise the answer to his personal problems. It does not mean that personal conditions, difficulties, or predicaments will be made any less tragic, but the person who lives with Christ has a divine strength that enables him to bear them and even transform them as Christ did His cross.

I will never forget a lady I used to visit when I was a pastor. When I first knew her she had lain in bed for eighteen years. She had some disease that took away all power of muscular movement. She was perfectly well and could see, hear, and talk, but all the movement she could make was to turn her head to her right and raise her right arm just enough to shake hands with you. She could eat if you put food in her mouth. She could sit in a wheel chair provided you strapped her in tightly, since she had no power to keep herself from falling or

even just to sit. It is true she had wonderful care from those around her who loved her dearly, and they could hardly help loving that charming and sweet personality. For that she was. I have never known a happier or jollier person, and it was a blessing to call on her. Actually it was fun to visit her. I must admit that if I felt discouraged and down in the dumps I would visit her and feel better, for she had a wonderful ministry. For that was what it was. She used to tell me she thought perhaps God had made her that way so she could show people what Christ could mean. I am not sure that God does this sort of thing but, at least, did He not send Jesus to win us by suffering? Anyway, that was what she thought, and it brought her so close to Christ that He was the answer for her. Well, we may not be in the situation this dear lady was but we do have our problems and difficulties. Christ can be the answer for us if we will only draw close to Him.

So here you have what Christmas really means. It is the recognition of God's gift to us which can redeem our entire lives and be the true answer in all life's situations. For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that those who believe in him and accept him may have eternal life in the here and now.

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