

“Rejecting the Gift”

“He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”

Gift returns are usually a regular part of Boxing Day in stores, along with sales that are mostly online this year. Long lines can be seen in many stores, filled with people returning gifts that either do not fit or were not desired. A rejected gift may be a matter of personal taste but returning a gift can also have devastating consequences if the gift that was rejected was important to the giver, if it involved a great deal of personal sacrifice and is taken as a personal insult or a rejecting the giver themselves. Even if a gift was not at the top of one’s wish list, rejecting and returning such a gift can be a source of friction and can even ruin a close relationship.

In the Gospel of John, the Evangelist reflects on the gift we celebrate at Christmas, the birth of Jesus who was *“the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth”* (1:14). While this is the great gift we celebrate at Christmas, it is a gift that has been rejected by many: *“He came to what was his own, and his own did not receive him”* (1:11). Many rejected the *“grace and truth [that] came through Jesus Christ”* (1:17) – and many still do.

The Fourth Gospel begins *“in the beginning”* with the cosmic pre-existence of the Word and the Word’s relationship to the world rather than stories of Jesus’ birth:

- “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” – 1:1-3.

John places the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ not at his birth in Bethlehem but at the beginning of creation (“in the beginning” are also the first three words of Genesis) and identifies Jesus as the “Word” (*logos*), the creative force through which the heavens and the earth were formed (*“Then God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”* – Genesis 1:3). John stresses the eternal existence of Jesus as the Word, an existence outside the bonds of time and history; it is the origin of our understanding of Jesus as *“true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary, [who] is my Lord”* (*Small Catechism*). The eternal Word will not stay outside of time and history, however, but will enter the

time-bound world; *“the oneness of the Word and God means that the revelation spoken and acted by the Word is indeed the revelation of God”* (Gail O’Day).

As life came into being at creation, so has life come into the midst of humanity in the coming of the Word: *“What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* (1:4-5). Throughout the Fourth Gospel, the ability to give and sustain life is symbolized by the light:

- “Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.’ – 8:12.
- “As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” – 9:5.
- “Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world.’ – 11:9.

The light that shines in the Word continues in the present tense, whereas the activity of darkness – all that sought to separate humanity from God – is relegated to the past tense, with no power over those who are now in the light. This light was proclaimed by John the Baptist, the one who *“came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him”* (1:7). John plays a critical role in all four Gospels (as we will see next Sunday as we commemorate the Baptism of our Lord); in the Fourth Gospel, the role of the Baptizer is to point toward Jesus as the *“Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”* (1:29). The Evangelist, like all Gospel authors, clearly differentiate the identities of John and Jesus to clear up any lingering confusion about these two distinct individuals: *“He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.”* (1:8-9). Once Jesus appears on the scene, John’s role in the Gospel narrative is completed and he fades from the scene.

- “The witness of John belongs to the story of Jesus. As the light enters the world, the focus shifts from the eternal Word to the historical. The transtemporal is wedded to concrete human experience through the person and witness of John.” – O’Day.

John locates the eternal Word which is the light of all people as being *“in the world”* (1:10); *kosmos* is used in the Fourth Gospel to refer specifically to humanity and its domain (*“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever”* – Revelation 11:15). The world owes its very existence to the Word, but the world that God so loved that *“he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life”*

(3:16) rejects the gift of the Word, a rejection made even more painful in John's statement that "*the world did not know him.*" The heartbreaking nature of this rejection of the Word is reinforced by the statement that "*he came to what was his own*" – the very humanity who came into being through the Word – "*and his own people did not accept him.*" (1:11). The good news that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds of the gift that "*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord*" (Luke 2:11) is a gift that is rejected by many, a rejection that causes great pain to our Lord who freely gives of himself for the sake of the world:

- "Our text is heartbreaking. The puzzle, the tragedy – that God was in 'the world made through him, but the world knew him not' (verse 10). 'He came to his home, and his own people received him not' (verse 11). Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, said 'Let our hearts be broken by the things that break the heart of God.' We need go no further than this week's text. God made the world. But the world did not recognize, know, or welcome the very one to whom it owed its existence. We can blame the world. But what is that in God's own heart? If we want to ponder what grace is about, it is right here." – James Howell.

While some of the Lord's own people did not receive him, not all rejected the gift of light and life that are present in the Incarnate Word, our Lord Jesus Christ: "*But to all who received him who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God*" (1:12-13). The world's response to the Word is explicitly recounted as a drama of rejection and acceptance. Human beings who belong to the temporal realm are given a chance for life that depends on faith, not on any earthly restraints. Despite the heartbreaking rejection from those who will not accept this gracious gift, this section ends in a note of hope and promise that all who believe that the gift is for them will receive through it the power and blessing to become children of God.

- "Here you learn what a great glory is accomplished by the Son of God in his coming among those who receive him, have faith in him, and believe him to be the one sent by God to help the world. This is to be the new work and a new way, that he will give the power and the right to become children of God to them who believe in his name." – Martin Luther.

The good news of the Incarnation that fulfills Isaiah's prophecy that "*the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is*

with us” (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23) is proclaimed as “*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth*” (1:14). “To make one’s dwelling” recalls God’s promise to dwell with God’s people in Ezekiel: “*My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people*” (Ezekiel 37:27). The “glory” (*doxa*) of which the multitude of the heavenly host sang (“*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours*” – Luke 2:14) picks up the Old Testament sense of “glory” as the manifest presence of God and confesses that this presence is now visible in Jesus (“*And one [of the seraphs] called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’*” – Isaiah 6:3). In the Fourth Gospel, the fullest expression of Jesus’ glory is found in his death, resurrection, and ascension:

- “Now he said this about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive, for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.” – 7:39.
- “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him.” – 12:16.
- “When [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him.’” – 13:31.

As the Incarnate Word, Jesus is “*full of grace and truth,*” a phrase that echoes the Hebrew word pair “steadfast love” (*hesed*) and “truth” (*emet*) that speaks of God’s covenantal love and faithfulness: “*The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin ...*” (Exodus 34:6-7). The grace and truth of the Word became the “*grace upon grace*” in the life of the Christian community, for “*from his fullness we have all received*” (1:16). The gift of the Law through Moses is placed next to the new gift of grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ. John does not disparage the previous gift, but points to the gift now available through Jesus Christ as something wondrously new as is proclaimed in the letter to the Hebrews:

- “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as

much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” – Hebrews 1:1-4.

The ministry of Jesus that will be proclaimed in the Fourth Gospel is centered on making God known: “*No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.*” (1:18). The witness of the Bible is to make God known, “*so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*” (Luke 1:4).

- “Ours is to be in awe, to shiver in reverie, to be ‘lost in wonder, love and praise.’ And then, like John the Baptist and Karl Barth, simply to point. The preacher is the docent in the museum, leading parishioners to the big picture of Jesus. You point, you say *Wow*, and then they do not even notice you any longer.” – Howell.

As this Christmas season draws to a close, we once again reflect upon the gifts we have received in this season. Even though the pandemic forced many changes in the way we celebrate our Saviour’s birth, many families found ways to exchange gifts and to connect with one another while keeping proper social distance. While we may keep our trees and decorations up a bit longer to bring some light and joy into these dark and disturbing days, the time will come when we will gather the gifts that have encircled the tree and put them to the use for which they were given and intended. Some of those gifts will be cherished and well-used, while some gifts may either linger in the backs of drawers or eventually returned or regifted. While the return counters at stores are now closed, the annual return of rejected gifts will somehow continue. Such is the case with the greatest of all Christmas gifts: the good news that “*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is the Messiah, the Lord.*” It is a gift that will be cherished by many, but it is also a gift that will be rejected by people who either do not recognize that in the child born of Mary is the very Word of God which is the gift of light and life for all people or who decide that such a gift is of no use to them. As many would turn their backs on our Lord in his life (“... *many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him*” – John 6:66), so also will many continue to reject the gift that endures, the most precious gift that God freely bestows upon us in Jesus Christ, the gift that promises us that the light will also shine and that no darkness can defeat us or separate us from the gift of light that is incarnate in Jesus Christ our Lord.

- “The rejection of Jesus by those who have shared in the story of the incarnation from the beginning is the true tragedy, and the church may sometimes find

itself in the role of Jesus' rejecting 'own.'" Verses 12-13 highlight the tragedy of rejecting by describing the fresh possibilities offered to those who believe ... This belief is the beginning of a new relationship with God, because those who believe are now children of God." – O'Day.

As a child, I did not always appreciate the Christmas gifts I received, especially if they were clothing or socks that were given me when what I really wanted was the lasted toy or game. But as I grew older, I have come to appreciate that gifts and those who gave them to be as people who loved me and wanted me to be blessed with clothing that was given in love, as God provides "*shoes and clothing, food and drink, house and farm, spouse and children, fields, livestock, and all property ... out of pure, fatherly, and divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all!*" (*Small Catechism*). As all gifts in all seasons are given to us by our loving, Heavenly Father, may we never reject what our Lord is offering us but receive it always with thanksgiving and use it for the purposes for which our God intends; "*for all this I owe it to God to thanks and praise, serve and obey him. This is most certainly true.*" (Luther). As we enter a new year filled with uncertainty but trusting in the presence of the Word that became flesh and lives eternally among us as the embodiment of God's steadfast love and mercy, may we never reject this gift or take it for granted; may we at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to God the Father through the greatest gift of all, the child of Mary who was born "for you" so that the light of Christ's love may dwell among us richly, assuring us that no matter what darkness we may encounter the light of Christ will shine before us full of grace and truth; for our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ has come "*as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.*" (John 12:46).

Amen.